



# **CONFETTI**

**Un journal de littératures  
et cultures du monde**

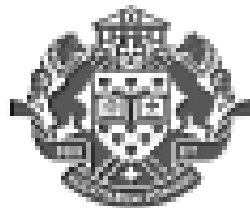
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# CONFETTI

**Un journal de littératures et cultures du monde**  
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**Éditeurs / Editors:**

Rebecca Good, Matthew Mucha

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## BIENVENUE/WELCOME

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This fourth volume of *Confetti* once again reflects the diversity and the intellectual and creative energies that shape the Masters program in World Literatures and Cultures. La Maîtrise est un programme d'études interdisciplinaire et bilingue en sciences humaine qui offre une formation centrée sur la recherche et l'évaluation des formes de contacts, de relations, et d'échanges multiculturels, interculturels et transculturels. The students in the program and the faculty members involved with it come from a broad range of academic disciplines and cultural backgrounds. Our shared passion for studying cultural expressions from around the world complements our immense diversity of approaches, and this combination leads to exciting and often unexpected synergies. Dans l'atmosphère intime de nos séminaires, nous apprenons les un(e)s des autres et nous nous posons des défis intellectuels et mutuels. In one short year, the faculty and student members of the program get to know and collaborate with each other in the development of the students' individual research programs, and some of the fruits of that labour are presented here.

Congratulations to the authors and editors of this fourth volume with its dynamic blend of Canadian and international topics.

Joerg Esleben  
Directeur du département  
Department Chair

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Ce quatrième numéro du journal, tout comme les trois numéros publiés depuis 2015, est entièrement le résultat du travail fort et dédié des étudiantes de la Maîtrise ès arts en littératures et cultures du monde / MA in World Literatures and Cultures, un programme unique au Canada : bilingue, interdisciplinaire et dynamique. It is my honour and great pleasure as program director to add a few introductory remarks to this exciting new volume of *Confetti*. Created entirely by our students, this volume features their research that encompasses different critical approaches and methodologies to analyze a variety of narrative expressions, from film, novels and short stories to imagined landscapes and videoclips. Ce volume est organisé selon trois axes thématiques qui expriment bien les sujets étudiés au sein de nos séminaires : landscapes and identity; imagining the Other; and gendered reflections on history, society and the self. The seven papers grouped around the three thematic clusters cast a wide geographic net, from Canada and the United States to Japan, Central Europe and Russia.

En somme, on trouve ici une riche collection des expressions culturelles variées à travers du monde. In the name of the professors who have taught and supervised these creative and dedicated students, I would like to extend my sincere congratulations to the editors and the contributors.

Agatha Schwartz  
Directrice, Maîtrise ès arts en littératures et cultures du monde  
Director, Master of Arts in World Literatures and Cultures

**Northern Reflections: Cultural Landscapes and  
Canadian Identity/Reflets du nord : les paysages  
culturels et l'identité canadienne**

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# ***Double Happiness and The Pin: Landscapes of Cultural Change and Spatial Instability***

By Leah Droppo

## ***Abstract***

This article uses Carol O’Sullivan’s aural and visual storytelling and Northrop Frye’s “obliterated environment” to relate how the language within the landscape problematizes the transference of cultural spaces through the medium of film. *Mise-en-scène* is used as an overarching term to stand in for the directors’ focus on lighting, space, film-stock, acting, and camera composition. This article breaks down aural and visual representation of Chinese and Jewish cultures within the films to define the cultures’ spaces of existence and question how they are transmitted within a Canadian context. Through Frye’s question “Where is here?”, this paper is positioned to break down the space of storytelling to determine how the characters negotiate their hybridized identities beyond their homelands.

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## **1. Introduction**

The medium of film offers a complex space to negotiate techniques in which culture is transmitted to the next generation. What is most challenging about analyzing film is the multi-layered dimension behind visual and aural storytelling. Film continually prompts the senses as the viewer is immersed in the imaginary world of the director. For the purpose of this paper, the term *mise-en-scène* will be used as an overarching term to define the directors’ focus on lighting, space, film-stock, acting, and camera composition. Through the development of these elements within the films, a varying degree of power is presented by means of a wide range of camera angles and editing techniques. The director uses the camera to show differing notions of power in order to homogenize cultural transmission as a mode of entertainment. Through analyzing cinematic renditions of cultural tension, one will inevitably discover problems with authenticity and it is from

there that one can delve into the layers of the film to find a deeper level of understanding. This paper will address key concepts used to analyze the films, confront film reviews and question them, and then focus on the problematic representation of cultures in the landscapes of Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* (1994) and Naomi Jaye's *The Pin* (2013).

In Jim Leach's article "The Landscapes of Canada's Features: Articulating Nation and Nature," he outlines the search for a Canadian national identity within cinematographic spaces. He defines Northrop Frye's term 'obliterated environment' under two distinct headings of identity. First Frye argued that "the Canadian sensibility... is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'" (qtd. in Leach 271). In this sense, the ability to understand Canada is beyond "the capacity of the human imagination and thus resists framing, becoming what he termed an 'obliterated environment'" (Leach 271). This term was used again later in his life to represent the affects of modernization and globalization on other countries that similarly dealt with "the same kind of disorientation that has long shaped Canadian cultural traditions" (Leach 271). In essence, the cultural environments that Jade and Jacob are positioned in are obliterated by the ensuing globalizing principles that dominate and cause cultural tension in their cinematic spheres. As consequence, I will branch off Frye's term in order to not only deal with 'obliterated environments' in terms of modernization and globalization, but to incorporate how these environments obliterate cultural continuity as the mother culture breaks down and changes when exposed to Western society. By applying a mix of Frye's "obliterated environment" and Carol O'Sullivan's theories about language discourse and their place within cinema, one will be shown the complexity behind *mise-en-scène* within *Double Happiness* and *The Pin* which questions

‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where is here?’ O’Sullivan’s terms are necessary to relate how language adds to the aural storytelling to frame and deconstruct the directors’ landscape choices. The terms aural and visual storytelling will be applied to sections of the films to question imagery and audio cues in the films in order to make sense of the proceeding narratives.

Through looking at a multitude of film reviews, it is interesting to look at the lack of representation and questioning of landscape outside the home environment of the films. *Double Happiness* outlines the story of Jade, an aspiring actress that is held back by her father’s will for her to become a housewife in order to achieve economical security. One review states that Jade’s lifestyle outside the Li family home is “freewheeling, liberated and ambitious” whereas “she finds herself reverting to the dutiful traditional Chinese daughter role...” in the presence of her family (Thomas). The review outlines the necessity of analyzing the space of representation inside and outside the home, as the fluidity of Jade’s identity comically causes cultural clashes and exposes the absurdity of following outdated cultural values in a modern Canadian context. Another review points out that this “[coming-of-age film] marvels at the distance between Jade’s expectations and those of her parents, inviting her to take the next steps toward finding an identity of her own” (Maslin). This distance Jade creates is not due to parental expectations, but to a difference in cultural values that no longer apply to her within the urban environment of Vancouver. The city creates a man-made divide that obliterates the Chinese cultural identity by turning it into a piece of Canada’s cultural mosaic. In contrast, *The Pin* offers another coming-of-age story through the narrative of two Holocaust survivors, Jacob and Leah, which is set within and outside Canada yet

uses only Canadian landscapes as a backdrop. The protagonist, Jacob, collapses temporal spaces between the past and the present to bring about closure to his physical and emotional trauma from the Holocaust and his loss of two lovers, Rosa and Leah. What is truly profound is what lies beyond the narrative in relation to elements of mise-en-scène. Reviewers have stated that “Jaye’s camera establishes a languid, sensual rhythm, punctuated by moments of high tension” (Rinn) or that it is “an intimate art house film with languid pacing and a deliberate style...” (Ghert-Zand). Yet, these questions still remain: What are the points in the film that generate high tension? How are they created? What is the purpose of presenting a film in such a way? It is difficult to compare films that are relatively different on a narrative level. That is why this paper will use mise-en-scène as a connecting point for both directors as a way to compare and contrast methods of creating tension and storytelling beyond the space of the films. Through analyzing these diverse spaces of internal versus external or natural versus industrial, one can see a problematic portrayal of both narratives that undermines notions of authenticity and leads to a homogenizing effect on the audience. This paper will use O’Sullivan’s aural and visual storytelling and Frye’s “obliterated environment” to relate how the language within the landscape problematizes the transference of cultural spaces through the medium of film.

## **2. Spatial Security in Double Happiness: Cantonese, the Monologue, and the Garden**

The numerous environments in *Double Happiness* reflect the idea of the destruction of the Chinese identity through the modern industrial landscape of Vancouver. The heavy play on the industrial aspects adds to the degeneration of the Li family identity towards their mother country, China. Jade must maneuver around

differing expectations of her family, society, and her friends, in order to find a balance in her identity. By the end of the film, she chooses to leave her family and embrace her Western identity. How does it come to this point and why does her father create a space in the home that seems threatening to Jade's way of life? First, one will need to look at the place of Cantonese in the film within certain social settings and then look at why Jade's removal from her family is necessary for her external growth in Canadian society.

For many audience members, Cantonese is not a first or second language and it relates to a limited range of viewers. This distancing effect not only is felt by the audience, but Jade as well as she experiences varying perspectives of her ethnic identity in the film. The first audition for Jade outlines the place for a Chinese identity in Canada as something to be stereotyped and consumed by a white audience (Shum 8:54-10:13). The scene is set up to have dark lighting that only partially reveals everyone's faces and the sounds of the harbour, trains, and cars play in the background while the reel is filming. This scene demonstrates the clouding of identity and the use of the Chinese accent for stereotypical reasons of reducing Asian actors to limited roles. Accent, in this instance, "is called upon to generate [a] type of transposition" that acts to differentiate English accents..." from Jade's ethnic group (O'Sullivan 28). When she shows her sister and mother the part later on, her head is cut off from the film making her faceless and only recognizable through her accent (Shum 1:08:10-1:08:52). This approach has an homogenizing influence on Jade's Chinese identity, which is obliterated by Hollywood's demand to consume identities by casting an ignorant shadow on the reality of her cultural background. When Jade auditions for a second time for a Cantonese role under a Chinese director, she is met with hostility and further questioning of her ethnic identity (Shum

1:04:00-1:06:48). The scene starts with Jade looking at her reflection which slowly blurs and fades into her audition. Industrial sounds play in the background again while the scene transfers to the present audition. If one looks at the costume designs of Jade, the director and the scouting agent, one notices a great deal of difference in colour scheme. Jade wears a dark pant suit with a floral undershirt while the director and scouting agent wear white business attire and skirts. The difference in dress sets a hierarchical division between Jade's place versus the place of the director and scouting agent. The environment is enclosed in the industrial space with peeling walls while the director quizzes Jade on her ability to speak Cantonese. The fact that the director is also smoking a cigarette stands in for the smell of modernization and consumerism within Western culture. The director, after finding out Jade cannot read hànzi script, questions her identity as a Chinese woman. The varying degrees in which identity is treated leads to a confusion of what actually is a Chinese identity and how is it located in Canada. Is it something that is solely a stereotype represented with an accent or is it something that is lost through cultural hybridization?

There are many conflicting notions on which identity Jade should fit into and this identity is further conflicted by her father's set standards of what an ideal Chinese woman should be. This is best shown in Quo Li's monologue and the environment of the garden as the viewer perceives his interest/relation to his daughter as well as his difficult upbringing in China during the Cultural Revolution. Part of his monologue is as follows:

Quo Li (subtitled): ... My father would take me for walks in the garden. I remember my father did not have to work in his garden. We had servants to do almost everything... This was harder after the revolution. We lost absolutely

everything. But my father continued to uphold and live by the Li family values. For this he had our undying respect. And those values were unshakeable and could never change. But here, my children are completely different... (Shum 28:06-29:40)

Here, one can see that his values are from a traditional family home though with conflicting influence of the West. His effort to enforce the same value system on his children successfully pushes his family further from him. His narrow view is exemplified by the backdrop as he stands outside the green picture, which is much larger than the shot with a rake and his gardening gear. His attempt to master the garden is represented as fruitless and unknowledgeable as the green backdrop is limited in space while the remainder of the blue background is shadowy and only partly lit. His domineering nature ultimately works against him as he destroys the inner values of his culture by embodying negative aspects from it. This idea is furthered by the limited space of Quo Li's garden as it is fenced in and small in comparison to the rest of his land (Shum 10:34-11:14). This mimics his father's garden though it reveals how the Li family values have degenerated and are limited to a way of thought that will never change. The distancing effect of language is also presented in the garden as Quo and the mother are crouched speaking Cantonese while Jade stands over them and responds in English while wearing Western business attire. Quo Li also lacks interest in his daughter's life and is only concerned that she is not doing something disreputable which could jeopardize the family image within the Chinese community. One can see the difference of Jade's and Quo's world-views which creates a space for cultural miscommunication and a sense of cultural loss, since Jade is unable to change her father's ideals. Instead, Jade leaves, to the dismay of her

father, to discover herself in her own space at the end of the film where she is no longer controlled by the confines of her father's boundaries.

### **3. Spatial Security in *The Pin*: Yiddish, the Barn, and the Morgue**

Memory is the key space of existence for the shomer, Jacob, as his remembering process temporally deconstructs and mixes moments of the past and present. Through various *mise-en-scène* devices, one is exposed to Jacob's process of mental degeneration. The frame of the camera and the audible aspects are a distortion of a past that cannot truly be captured by the camera.

The usage of Yiddish in the film is a dangerous sphere that exists communally between Jacob and Leah in the film. The choice of Yiddish language was used by director Naomi Jaye for "vehicular matching" purposes to authenticate the film even though her the actors, Milda Gecaite and Grisha Pasternak, were not native speakers (Margolis 11 and 13). The film uses a standardized version of Yiddish in order to follow "Naomi Jaye's artistic vision: dialogue in an idealized Yiddish to match the fact that the film never states where it takes place in order to augment the overall sense of displacement" (qtd. in Margolis 14). The silencing of the Yiddish language in the film represents a silencing of the Jewish identity which is presented as dead in the present and fading in the past. This can be seen through Jacob's silent acceptance to stay after a colleague does not show up (Jaye 3:23-3:30) or Jacob and Leah's use of Russian over Yiddish to hide their identities in the barn (Jaye 9:17-10:00; 1:09:16-1:11:00). Though the language is used to vehicular match, one can argue that the imperfection of the Yiddish intonations verifies the notion that Jewish cultural environments are being obliterated by society as Jacob

must presently contest with an English secular society in Canada. The space for Yiddish turns from a dangerous sphere of existence into something sterile that lacks religious meaning. Jacob's skewed mental capacities for remembering Yiddish also artistically account for the imperfect Yiddish translation Jacob gives through his trail of remembrance in the film.

The visual appearance of the barn is a place that is exposed to the elements and is framed by the shroud of the forest (Jaye 6:29-6:46). In both frames of the barn, one can see the danger of the barn as an open space structurally and geographically. The barn creates a claustrophobic and intimate sphere for the developing love story. The characters are frequently stuck hiding with each other in silence as a survival tactic until there is a means for escaping their situation. The space is mostly dark and the features of the characters are obscured by the varying degree of natural light from the environment outside the barn (Jaye 21:01-22:14). Thunderstorms sound in the background, black out the screen and cause a temporal passage into further darkness. The dialogue the couple launches into discusses the worst lie they have ever told. This discussion sets up the barn as a moral testing ground that challenges the darkness of Jacob's present state. The natural turbulence allows for a sense of pathetic fallacy in which the environment of the memory uses natural sounds outside the barn to represent Jacob's internal emotional turmoil of remembrance. The barn, then, is associated with the constricting and open recesses of Jacob's mind that crosses boundaries and merges with the space of the morgue (Jaye 43:47-44:59). The crossing of landscapes demonstrates his preoccupation with past trauma as the claustrophobia of the barn unites with the sterility of the morgue. Both settings are used to reveal Jacob's mental landscape which stimulates all his senses

to kinesthetically propel the past into the present (Spencer-Wood and Baugher 464). The cinematic landscape, though composed of framing, also acts as “conduits to memories, and a form of time, that transcends the cinema itself” (Harper and Rayner 19). It acts to morally check Jacob’s actions and to test the outer limits of his faith. It opens up the reading of landscape in *The Pin* beyond a simple material space into a psychological space that calls for “group or cultural comprehension” (Harper and Rayner 20).

The audience is shown that Jacob’s spacial security lies within the urban setting of the West. The final image of Jacob leaving the morgue is a tragic scene filmed outside the dirty windows of the morgue (Jaye 1:21:16-1:22:40). The visual aspect of this scene speaks louder than words as it shows the lifelessness of his Jewish faith. The medium of film was originally used as a mode that “could proved a transparent ‘window’ on to the real world” though Jaye transforms this view into a dirty window which critiques a broader sense of cultural representation (qtd. in Aitken and Dixon 327). The frame is divided into three spaces of existence: the left side with the candle, the middle with Leah’s body on the steel table, and the darkest side which frames the cupboard, jackets, and door. Slowly through the scene, Jacob moves from the light side to the darkness of the door. When he exits the room, he leaves the boundaries of the camera’s frame. His moving from light to darkness is representative of his cultural obliteration and the sterility of his faith within the industrial context of Toronto. The movie ends on an eerie note in which Jacob successfully breaks cultural traditions in order to reveal a problematic side to the urban environment in which he exists. In the unproductive sphere of his Jewish tradition, he has lost faith while attending to a sacred duty within Judaism. This breaking with tradition is best seen through his association of Leah’s body as a

living memory rather than a body being prepared for internment. “This process called tahara (purification), involves the ritual cleaning of the corpse, by men for males and by women for females” (Telushkin 703). Telushkin offers a story in describing the work of the Chevra Kadisha (Holy Society) stating that “they [tend] the corpse gently and reverently, yet [do] not pretend it [is anything] other than a corpse” (703). With this in mind, one can see a skewing of Jacob’s cultural practices as he desecrates Leah’s body with his memory of her. The positioning of the camera behind the dirty window demonstrates a grainy film-stock that represents a blurred vision of reality clouded by the urban environment he exists in. Even through interactions with the memory of the barn, Jacob cannot overcome his stasis and sterility in Toronto’s urban environment.

#### **4. A Direct Comparison: Cinematography and Landscapes**

The landscapes in the films are presented in direct relation to the character which represents their need to escape from distorted versions of their cultural rites of passage. *Double Happiness* and *The Pin* follow a line of crisis of the male figures that leads to eventual separation from loved ones. An unwillingness to communicate causes the break down of Quo Li’s family values and Jacob’s Jewish practices. The next section will show a comparison of the plight of women when they try to escape the framing of their male counter parts. What I call “The Search for Freedom” scenes are present in both films as the main female lead attempts to escape her current fear in order to find a sense of freedom outside the enclosure and within the landscape (Shum 1:14:15-1:15:18 and *Jaye* 45:47-47:33). There are many differences in these scenes in terms of the aural and the visual especially with the enunciation of language, the way music and the natural landscape resonate in the background, and the outcome of the female lead’s quest. First,

this article will look at the language and musical elements to determine the stance of the aural and then situate the visual through cinematic framing techniques. Finally, it will look at the dynamic of the industrial versus the natural to determine the female lead's connection/disconnection to the landscape. This will help shape how the cultural landscape is being shifted and how it is shaped by the devices of *mise-en-scène*.

In *Double Happiness*, Jade runs from her final date in a harbour and slowly gets deeper into the industrial scene. One can pick up the inaudible state of her voice as the hard rock music progresses with the scene. The rock music changes at the end of the scene to deep breathing which initiates a return to a primal state of existence. The scene has no use of language and yet it conveys so much about Jade's frustration within her current situation. The audience literally feels the silence Jade feels about her identity through the overdubbing of rock music over her crying screams. This point in the movie allows for Jade's transformation into an independent woman away from her father's tyranny. In comparison, *The Pin* does something similar, however Leah progresses into a separate space of trauma. Leah is awoken by muffled Russian being spoken outside barn and she is paralyzed with fear. The Russian dialogue is left untranslated to the audience to mimic a dangerous "undifferentiated noise" that adds to the soundscape which "[triggers] reduced rather than semantic listening" (O'Sullivan 72). This feeling of reduced listening creates tension not only in the scene with Leah, but in the viewer as well since one cannot understand what is being spoken. The Russian is further convoluted by the chaotic noises of the birds chirping and ends with the firing of gunshots. Leah has a sensory overload that causes her to shut down and run from the barn to the upward space of the hill. This upward camera angle creates a sense of hierarchy that Leah is

unable to surmount. It is only through her capture and Jacob's dialogue that she is forced to return to the barn.

Jacob (subtitled): You are alive. You must live. You are alive. We are alive. You will dance at your granddaughter's wedding. We must go back.

The audience, aware of the dangerous landscape, uses 'causal' listening and is soothed by Jacob's calm emotional state (O'Sullivan 73). The lack of other languages than Yiddish creates an aural space which is safe but the return to the chaotic is a temporal necessity until a safe opportunity for escape presents itself. This idea exists within both contexts of *Double Happiness* and *The Pin* as both female leads must return to the restrictive environments of their temporary home to become free from their oppressive landscapes.

The framing of each film is different which allows for a development of their relation to the setting devoid of sound. Shum's film uses a panning shot of Jade running through the harbour, yet she never gets anywhere beyond the frame. The space of the shot literally represents Jade's lack of momentum as there is no satisfactory end to her suffering without pain. Through this break down, she is able to gain the courage to challenge her father's intentions and embrace an identity beyond her father's framing. Contrary to Northrop Frye's idea of "obliterated environment," Jade does not resist the framing of the environment, only the cultural practices of her father (qtd. in Leach 271). This lack of resistance to the urban exemplifies her feelings of stasis and her inability to discover her identity beyond the limited scope of her father's image. This filming technique is completely different than Jaye's which frames the characters in the barn and

the camera literally chases after Leah until Jacob enters the frame to stop her. The characters are represented in a medium shot that shakes and cuts them off the edge of the frame. The space outside the film seeks to engulf their lives as they struggle to survive within the confines of the camera lens. In essence, their story can never truly be captured by the camera as it can only chase after their story since it lacks control over their escapist attempt to reach beyond the boundaries of the frame. This resistance plays into Frye's "obliterated environment" as the capacity of the human imagination resists the framing of the pastoral environment as the pastoral is chaotic rather than a soothing visual representation. Within both scenes, the framing requires close attention in order to situate Jade and Leah's relationship to the setting as they are silenced by their social and physical environments. The landscape takes on the role of the characters' emotional foil as the space moving forward is either clear without movement or an uphill struggle.

The industrial versus the natural landscape is a prominent feature in both films and comparatively represents similar stances towards their relationship to the landscape. This article has demonstrated how the female lead's are silenced by oppressive cultural landscapes and either submit to framing or are pulled back into the frame. How does each character relate to the natural surroundings and what are their views towards the natural? If one looks at the scene of the garden mentioned earlier in this essay (Shum 10:34-11:14), one can see Jade's disconnect from the natural environment. The natural, to Jade, is an oppressive state which seeks to conform Jade to her father's Chinese ideal way life, whereas the industrial offers an escape and a potential area for growth beyond the garden fence. This idea runs contrary to the Taoist framing of people in landscape paintings as "human beings appear as small figures, like dots, in this broad and borderless natural

world. They seem to merge with nature” (Jingfū 118). Though painting is a different medium than film, the style is still used within Chinese cinema when filming extreme wide shots. Rather than finding solitude in the natural, Jade stands forefront in a medium shot and is not fully immersed in the landscape, but stands apart from it. Jade runs away from the conformity of her father’s garden and embraces the industrial with arms stretched open as a means for escape. Similarly, Leah seeks to escape the enclosure of the Jewish pastoral environment. Her attempt to run beyond the barn and her inevitable return to it by being captured by Jacob reveals the oppressiveness of agriculture and the space in which the rural exists. The rural setting is not an idyllic space of existence but rather a “collective malaise” as one is left to recognize the harshness of the rural landscape in a time of war and general upheaval of humanity (Leach 272). In this sense, both characters must return to the framing of the house or the barn in order to be free from the landscape through their immersion into the industrial, which causes a disconnect from their cultural practices and homeland. The natural is a confining chaotic place that seeks to domineer rather than provide a space for internal growth.

## **5. Conclusion**

The representation of space in the film is a problematic one that requires a suspension of disbelief in certain instances. Within the confines of *Double Happiness* and *The Pin*, a contested environment is created to challenge notions of cultural transmission within Hollywood and to promote new ways of thinking about ethnic representation. Many items were only briefly touched on in this paper and could offer more insight into the scope of how Shum and Jaye represent Chinese and Jewish culture within the confines of the frame. This could be taken further by a closer analysis of gender in

landscape by looking at how gender performativity is shaped by culture in these select landscapes. There is also an avenue for further development of the importance of the industrial especially in relation to the technical editing processes of film. Trains, boats and other forms of transportation take on key roles in representing Canadian identity that also could not be fully developed in this paper. The next step would be to acknowledge the decimation of cultural spaces within cinematography and to question why these dynamics are closely tied to Canadian cinema and the immigrant experience. The use of language enhances the interpretation of landscape as it negotiates identities within a highly audio-visual environment in order to stimulate action against cultural appropriation and cultural miscommunication on a global scale. Fry's questions of 'Who am I?' and 'Where is here?' is still debatable as these films have shown that Canadian identity reaches beyond the boundaries of cinematographic framing.

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# *Qamani'tuac*

By Raymond Auclair

## ***Résumé - Abstract***

*L'auteur est à la retraite. Il a été, au cours des années 1970, officier de navigation sur les navires de la Garde côtière canadienne. Il est retourné aux études par intérêt personnel et compte sept grades postsecondaires. Il est présentement inscrit au programme de maîtrise en littératures et cultures du monde.*

*Cet article est adapté d'un travail qu'il a fait dans le cadre du cours LCM5302 sur la théorie littéraire des voyages, en octobre 2017.*

Dans la culture et l'histoire Inuit, la ville de Baker Lake ne devrait pas exister. C'était un camp saisonnier où des Inuits de groupes différents se rencontraient, l'été, pour aller chasser et pêcher, afin de ravitailler leurs villages respectifs. L'interférence du colonisateur européen et du gouvernement canadien a fait de Baker Lake une création artificielle. S'agissait-il d'une tentative de construire une utopie? L'auteur mêle ses souvenirs de voyage (1973) avec la recherche littéraire, pour décrire ce mystère.

*The author is retired. In the 1970s, he was a navigating officer on Canadian Coast Guard ships. He revisited student life for his own interests and has seven post-secondary diplomas. He is presently registered in the Masters of World Literatures and Cultures.*

*This article is adapted from a paper submitted for LCM5302 Travel and [literary] Theory, in October 2017.*

In Inuit culture and history, the town of Baker Lake should not exist. It was a seasonal camp where Inuit from different groups would gather, in summer, for hunting and fishing, with the goal of replenishing the supplies of their individual communities. The interference from European colonizers and the Canadian government has contributed to the artificial creation of Baker Lake. Was it an attempt to build Utopia? The author mixes his own travel memories (1973) with his literature research, in order to describe this mystery.

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## **1. Baker Lake is... a place**

Baker Lake is a place. Sure, there is a lake called Baker, but there is also a hamlet at its head, where the Thelon river empties its water into the lake, on its way to the Chesterfield river and Hudson Bay.

The Inuit use the rivers the way we use highways. The lake is just a widening of the highway from Hudson Bay to their summer hunting and fishing grounds.

It is Qamani'tuac "the place where the river widened".

Hunters from different Inuit groups would gather yearly, at the head of the lake, before pushing on to gather food: the caribou migration path covered a wide corridor.

The lake got its English name in 1762, when the Hudson Bay Company's (HBC) explorers were mapping their territory. William Baker was, at the time, a Governor of the company.

Only in 1924 did the HBC build a trading post at the head of the lake, thus forming the nucleus for the hamlet. (Baker Lake Web site)

## **2. A place in the middle of nowhere**

Baker Lake is the only inland Inuit community. The only one. All other traditional Inuit communities are within easy reach of salt water. From Baker Lake, across the lake and down the Chesterfield river, the closest sea water, Hudson Bay, is 300 km away.

Baker Lake is an "island" in a sea of bedrock scoured free of any soil by the advance of the glacier. The glacier was so heavy, pressing down so hard, that the land has been rebounding very slowly, millimetres per year, since the melt, 15,000 years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Nooks and crannies, carved by water and ice, are filled with a compost of earlier biological material. Hundreds of kilometres of naked bedrock surround us. Moss and

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<sup>1</sup> *GEO 1115, Intro to Earth Materials (Geology), uOttawa (audited Fall 2015)*

flower patches are like coloured whitecaps on the waves and swells of that unmoving sea (fig. 1).

At the right time of the year, the place is teeming with caribou and animals that tag along during the migration. Searches in older Inuit hunting camps show the hunters ate well and caught plenty of food for their own communities. (Blangy and Deffner 247)

The place is in the middle of Canada, literally. Take Canada's extreme latitudes and longitudes, find the mid-points and you get a position<sup>2</sup> near Yathkyed Lake, 240 km south of Baker Lake. This makes Baker Lake the closest community to this geographical centre of Canada.

Yathkyed Lake is still north of the tree line, but the summer vegetation there is more plentiful, with plants that could pass for bushes. The map found in Blangy and Deffner (242) shows the caribou calving grounds are in that general area.

We can imagine Inuit hunters avoided hunting around Yathkyed Lake for reasons linked to transportation: there is no direct water link and the calving takes place during the early summer, when the temperature is too warm for safe storage of the meat until winter.

If you visit, please don't go there without a GPS nor an EPIRB<sup>3</sup>. There are no easily recognizable features along the way between the middle of Canada and the place "in the middle of nowhere".

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<sup>2</sup> I calculated 62°23'47"N 098°18'41"W (for Google Earth, use the decimal values 62.39639N 98.31139W)

<sup>3</sup> **Global Positioning System; Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon.** There is no cell-phone coverage.



*Map of Nunavut, showing the approximate “centre of Canada” as the star below Baker Lake*

### 3. Why does Baker Lake even exist as a town?

During the Cold War, the USA installed the DEW Line<sup>4</sup> stations from Greenland (near Thule Air Force Base) to Alaska. Work began late in 1954. Often, American contractors worked as if the territory was theirs, not Canada's.

This prompted the Canadian government to establish permanent communities in the Arctic, in order to strengthen its case for sovereignty. Tester and Kulchyski describe how, starting in 1953, almost a hundred Inuit were moved from the southern Arctic (including the Hudson Strait coast of Quebec) to the high, sometimes very high Arctic. This is when, for example, the community of Grise Fjord (south part of Axel Heiberg Island) was created, by mixing Inuit families of Inukjuak (then Port Harrison) and Pond Inlet.

The government presented this as a humanitarian program, moving the Inuit from where access to food had become scarce (poor hunting, no employment) to new locations where their needs would be satisfied by local abundance and government support. (Blangy and Deffner 242)

In 1927, a report stated “When the Eskimo becomes a trapper he becomes, to a large extent, dependent on the white man for food and clothing. [...] In exchange for his furs he is given white flour or sea biscuits, tea and tobacco, which do not provide sufficient fuel to keep his body warm and nourished.” (qtd. in Tester and Kulcyski 108)

In reality, the relocated Inuit were used as “human flagpoles” (Pope) to assert Canada's sovereignty. The promised support from the government to the new

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<sup>4</sup> *Detection and Early Warning; radar stations to detect any Soviet air invasion of North America.*

communities almost never materialised. A promise to bring back some of them closer to their original land, after two or three years, was never fulfilled. Many of them died.

Canada finally admitted the mistake in 1990 with a formal apology and compensation to the relocated Inuit (through their descendants). In light of the above 1927 quote, future efforts to relocate or to make these nomadic people more sedentary, put them near sea shores where the Inuit's natural source of food and means of transportation are found.

#### **4. White Utopia for Inuit?**

Baker Lake seems to be an exception, but in the context of its location (the “flagpole” at the centre of Canada) and its role as a cultural crossroad (the intersection of hunting routes for at least eight groups of Inuit), sedentarization<sup>5</sup> was encouraged.

In the mid-1950s, Baker Lake got a small hospital; the bigger regional hospital was built in Chesterfield Inlet, at the mouth of the river. A school followed, then a landing strip, two churches, a grocery store and a clothing factory (fig. 6).

To complete this white man's utopia, we gave them wooden houses, just like down south. Being hundreds of kilometres north of the tree line, the idea of wooden houses was foreign to the Inuit. How to stay warm in a house made of flammable material?

We gave them oil furnaces. And skidoos for hunting, and guns, and... What more can they wish for? Of course, someone had to bring all this stuff up north.

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<sup>5</sup> *Sedentarization occurs when a dominant group restricts the movements of a nomadic group.* (*Sedentism on Wikipedia*)

## 5. The Coast Guard and I

The North was largely unexplored at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Captain J.E. Bernier, on the *Arctic* claimed Baffin Island for Canada, on 9 November 1906. (Appleton 74) His trip was mostly one of discovery, but also one of assertion of sovereignty, as foreign countries<sup>6</sup> were also exploring the Arctic to establish their own land claims. Appleton (Chapter IV) describes how this need to assert sovereignty pushed Canada to build a fleet of icebreakers and conduct yearly patrols all over the Canadian Arctic, starting in the 1920s. All these ships were consolidated into a Canadian Coast Guard fleet in 1962.

With time, these ship voyages included the provision of medical services, scientific research, transportation of supplies including heating oil and motor fuel, and so on.

In July 1973<sup>7</sup>, I set out from Québec on the *CCGS Skua*, a converted D-Day landing craft originally designed for a one-shot trip to Normandy, to land armoured tanks and soldiers. Canada had received five of these and converted them into small tankers to supply lighthouses in the South (e.g., St. Lawrence river) and Inuit communities in the North.

I was a navigation officer trained in nautical astronomy, navigation, cartography and mapmaking (what Amerigo Vespucci called a cosmographer). A sign of the time: we were also trained in recognizing incoming Soviet missiles and airplanes... just in case.

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<sup>6</sup> That year, near Hudson Strait, Arctic accosted the Neptune from Newfoundland (not part of Canada until 1949).

<sup>7</sup> This was my 4<sup>th</sup> summer in the Arctic, my second one as an officer. Trips were four months long back then.

We met our sister ship *CCGS Eider* at Chesterfield Inlet (fig. 2) and together, we sailed up to Baker Lake (fig. 3). Our “preliminary chart” had only one line of soundings, and even that showed spots where our ships should not be able to pass. Not only was it (for me) a voyage of discovery, it was also an adventure, flirting with danger. On our first trip up the river (we made seven trips), as the navigator, I was up all the time, recording positions and soundings for future charts, and planning the crossing of the lake.

After this 24-hour trip, we arrived at the settlement just as the Sun rose behind us (fig. 4). What a view of paradise! In this desert of rock and moss stood a village of a thousand<sup>8</sup> complete with glistening metal oil tanks and a newly-received satellite dish! (fig. 5)

Here we were, delivering southern utopia: groceries from the south, heating oil from the south, gasoline for their skidoos (from the south, of course).

I went ashore to visit this place, saw the hospital, the school, a church, the grocery store (where canned vegetables were selling for five times their southern prices) and the clothing factory (fig. 6). I even purchased an “Eskimo coat” for H  l  ne; a perfect fit<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> *Very big for an Arctic community; even today, Baker Lake is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest community*

<sup>9</sup> “How did you guess my size” I walked up to one of the sales girls and said: show me something that fits you.



1. *The rocky waves on the shores of the Chesterfield river.*      2. *CCGS Eider delivering oil in Chesterfield Inlet, 1973*      3. *Eider and Skua anchored in front of Baker Lake, 1973*



4. *Baker Lake at sunrise, late August 1973.*      5. *Baker Lake's newly installed satellite communication dish*      6. *A local enterprise, the Sewing Center selling Inuit clothing, 1973*

**6. Dystopia predicted**

Late 1970s data show that finding caribou, birds and marine mammals is more difficult; commercial fishing data show constant decline everywhere, including in Hudson Bay. (Usher and Wenzel 147) Would the hamlet of Baker Lake disappear?

Changes in caribou migration routes left the residents with more idle time. Once major construction was done, little employment was left. A gold mine (Meadowbank)

opened 100 km to the North, with its own direct link to Val d'Or; workers bypassed Baker Lake<sup>10</sup>. A road allows Inuit to find work at the mine. However, Tester and Blangy explain how mining efforts in the Arctic, despite the “discours sur « l'emploi » au détriment de la communauté inuit”(6) have enhanced economic disparities among residents and failed to give the Inuit the chance “de participer plus pleinement et de façon plus égalitaire à la société canadienne”. (7)

“Meadowbank has already seriously impacted the community of Qamani'tuaq by creating family problems, by increasing wage disparities and by exacerbating social problems.” (Blangy and Deffner, abstract) In addition, dust from the mine contributed to changes in caribou migration routes. (*Ibid.*)

Yet, the hamlet continues to grow. Its economy is still booming: new hotels are being built (yes, hotels!) and they are NOT for the southern mine workers who have their own residence at Meadowbank, with monthly crew changes. Dystopia is failing.

## **7. Balancing the view**

While the south was still practicing forced integration (for ex., residential school system), the residents of the still-young community at Baker Lake had decided to publicly celebrate their differences.

Most traditional Inuit communities each consisted of a single group. From the start, Baker Lake was a gathering of many groups of Inuit people (les Inuits du Caribou), and none of them claimed the location as a traditional home. They openly shared their

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<sup>10</sup> “NOLINOR 737.” *Mighty Planes*, season 3, episode 5, Discovery Channel. An intro video is available at: [www.smithsonianchannel.com/shows/mighty-planes/nolinor-737/1003002/3439342](http://www.smithsonianchannel.com/shows/mighty-planes/nolinor-737/1003002/3439342)

individual stories, legends and myths among themselves, and passed them on to their children. (Blangy and Deffner 241)

Although commercial fishing and hunting was declining, subsistence harvesting -- not captured by official data -- is still sufficient. (Usher and Wenzel 146) The traditional hunters still know where to find food.

When the mine opened, the company provided cell phone service to the hamlet and along the 115-km road. Generosity? Well, the mine needed satellite access and Baker Lake already had a satellite dish, installed in 1973. Win-win, I would say.

The population of Baker Lake is still young, with a median age of 22. (Blangy and Deffner 242) These young people are well versed in tradition AND modernity.

## **8. Conclusion**

Artificiality saved Baker Lake. A place that was not a place, a coincidental intersection of hunting routes, became a place in the middle of nowhere, and this nowhere became the centre of Canada: a flagpole was needed. The south gave them plenty, then left their culture alone, without forced assimilation. Today, Baker Lake continues to enjoy a good mix of southern-like economy and generous subsistence from nature.

Maybe not utopia, but definitely not dystopia.

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All photographs are by the author, while on board the CCGS Skua, 1973.

**In The Mind's Eye: Perceptions of Self and Other /  
L'oeil et l'esprit: perceptions de soi et de l'Autre**

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# Analysing Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*: The Layers of Erika's Masochism

By Ecem Yucel

## *Abstract*

Elfriede Jelinek's highly controversial novel *The Piano Teacher* introduces its protagonist Erika Kohut, a thirty-eight-year-old piano teacher who works at the prestigious Vienna Conservatory. As the book follows the story of Erika, Jelinek reveals her protagonist's underlying sadistic, masochistic, voyeuristic, phallic and even fetishistic layers.

This paper aims to examine these layers of Erika's personality, associated with her most significant feature, masochism. A better understanding of these layers will help us deduct enlightening conclusions on Erika's masochism, and other psychological aspects related to the masochism, which are woven stitch by stitch throughout the book.

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## 1. Introduction

Elfriede Jelinek's 1983 novel *The Piano Teacher*, has been a highly controversial book. Taking place in the 1980s Vienna, the book follows the story of Erika Kohut, a thirty-eight-year-old piano teacher who works at the prestigious Vienna Conservatory. Living with her possessive and domineering mother, Erika has a limited, stressful and colorless life, which she tries to fill with secret visits to peep shows, voyeurism, porn, and self-harm. In the meantime, a narcissistic, handsome, popular, and aspiring piano student Walter Klemmer, who is in his early twenties, gets captivated by Erika's piano playing, iron-hard personality, indifference, and mysteriousness, making her his Everest to climb. As Erika and Klemmer know each other better, Klemmer discovers that Erika has many other layers underneath the surface. Layers showing her sadistic, masochistic, voyeuristic, phallic and even fetishistic sides.

This paper aims to examine these layers of Erika's personality, associated with her most significant feature, masochism. We will initially look at the terms of sadism and masochism. A better understanding of these terms will help us deduct enlightening conclusions on Erika's masochism, and other psychological aspects related to the masochism, which are woven stitch by stitch throughout the book.

Receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2004 for her "musical flow of voices and counter-voices in novels and plays that, with extraordinary linguistic zeal, reveal the absurdity of society's clichés and their subjugating power", Jelinek presents us a novel about a female character with an artistic soul, while criticizing the oppression of women with social structures, norms and boundaries, which are accepted as 'normal' in Austria in the 1980s.

*i. Sadism*

The Oxford English Dictionary's primary definition of sadism is: "the tendency to derive pleasure, especially sexual gratification, from inflicting pain, suffering, or humiliation on others." The terms sadism and sadist are derived from Marquis de Sade (b. 1740 - d. 1814), who was a French nobleman, writer, and philosopher. Sade was famous for his libertine sexuality, he hired young prostitutes and performed sadistic activities on them, such as tying them by four limbs, dropping hot wax on them, flagellation, giving them an aphrodisiac called Spanish fly (which made one prostitute seriously sick) besides many others. These mistreatments caused several prostitutes and a beggar-widower to complain to the French authorities. Besides these complaints, the accusations of his sodomy with his manservant came into the picture, so Sade fled to Italy together with his

manservant, to escape his death sentence. His cat-and-mouse game with the authorities did not always go well, and at the end, he was imprisoned for thirty-two years of his life in many prisons and an asylum. He wrote most of his works in prison and published them anonymously since they were erotic works, depicting perverse, strongly violent sexual practices, including sexual sadism, sexual masochism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, pedophilia, zoophilia, and necrophilia.

ii. *Masochism*

If we continue with the definitions of the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of masochism is: “the tendency to derive sexual gratification from one’s own pain or humiliation.” Famous Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing was the first one who used the term masochism in his 1886 compilation of case studies *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Krafft-Ebing named masochism after the Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch since Sacher-Masoch’s writings had masochistic themes.

Sacher-Masoch also practiced masochism. As illustrated in his book *Venus in Furs* (1869), he was attracted to dominant women who wore furs. Sacher-Masoch forced his wife Aurora von Rümelin to experience the practices in his book. Rümelin agreed, but she always had her doubts. After a while, getting bored with his marriage, Sacher-Masoch got mistresses with whom he could engage his sexual fantasies. One of those mistresses was Baroness Fanny Pistor, whom he signed a contract with, that made him her slave for six months. During this six-month period, Sacher-Masoch insisted the Baroness to wear furs whenever she could, especially when she was in a vicious mood.

It was Freud who invented the term *sadomasochism*, concluding that in every sadist there is a masochist and in every masochist, there is a sadist. Alongside with Freud, Krafft-Ebing also presumed that masochism was deeply essential to female sexuality and distinguishing it as a separate inclination would be difficult. However, in his essay *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty (Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, 1967)*, Gilles Deleuze claimed sadism and masochism as distinct from each other and rejected the term sadomasochism. In the sadomasochistic dynamic, both sadist and masochist wield control. The sadist seizes control and the masochist prefers it that way.

## **2. The Layers of Erika's Masochism**

### *i. Lack of the father figure*

In his *Ein Kind wird geschlagen (A Child is Being Beaten)*, Freud claims the beating fantasies ultimately reveal that the figure of father is the desired punisher (Schlipphacke, 102). In *The Piano Teacher*, Erika's father is simultaneously absent and present as a shadow. Nevertheless, Erika demonstrates several masochistic actions which comprise the father as a symbol. For instance, Erika's most brutal self-mutilation case is cutting her vagina with her father's razor blade:

(...) she takes out her little talisman, the paternal all-purpose razor. (...) she is very skilled in the use of blades; after all, she has to shave her father (...) (Jelinek, 86).

With little information about anatomy and with even less luck, she applies the cold steel to and into her body,

where she believes there ought to be a hole. The aperture gapes, terrified by the change, and blood pours out (86).

In the book, the scene of Erika's mutilation of her vagina is followed by the trip to Steinhof asylum to admit her father. Therefore, we can assume that there is a link between the two scenes. Also, right after Klemmer finishes reading Erika's letter, we read about Erika's longing:

(...) I hope he doesn't hit me unexpectedly, the woman thinks. She reveals to the man that she has been longing to be hit for many years now. She assumes she has finally found the master she has been longing for (229).

Here, Erika assumes that she came together with the master she has been longing for years, so we can also assume that growing up without a father, she felt the absence of a man in her household. She was longing for a male authority in her life, who would love her and punish her when she needed. Having no father figures or "the master" in her life, she gives Klemmer the role of male authority figure in her life and tries to fill the emptiness caused by the absence of this authority figure with her younger lover. She wants to elude her heavy responsibilities, which she has carried all those years as the symbolic male figure in her own house.

ii. *Electra Complex and the high level of stress caused by the "Mother"*

Erika's mother treats her like she is the man of the house; Erika is the one who works to bring money and food to their home. Because of her father's absence, Erika is unable to use the father as an anchor to allow her to detach, separate from her engulfing

mother, thus she attempts to differentiate from the mother by assuming the father's role and becoming the father. She constructs a symbolic phallic realm that becomes an exaggerated version of her father. Which brings us to Electra Complex, the female version of Oedipus complex. The psychodynamic structure of the daughter-mother relationship in the Electra complex derives from penis envy.

Penis envy is theorized by Sigmund Freud. It is a stage concerning female psychosexual development, in which young girls experience anxiety by realizing that they do not have a penis. This realization, as Freud considered, is a determining stage in changes toward a mature female sexuality and gender identity. According to Freud's theory, the penis envy stage starts when the attachment to the mother turns into a competition with the mother to gain the love, attention, and recognition of the father. In his fifth chapter titled "Psychoanalysis" of his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton describes this stage thus:

The little girl, perceiving that she is inferior because 'castrated', turns in disillusionment from her similarly 'castrated' mother to the project of seducing her father; but since this project is doomed, she must finally turn back reluctantly to the mother, effect an identification with her, assume her feminine gender role, and unconsciously substitute for the penis, which she envies but can never possess, a baby, which she desires to receive from the father (Eagleton, 135).

In other words, the mother who caused the girl's castration also causes the penis envy. So, the girl has to re-adjust her sexual attraction to her father now –to heterosexuality– and because she fears to lose her mother's love, she represses the hostile female competition too.

In her book, *The Myth of Women's Masochism*, Paula J. Caplan talks about penis envy and its relation to the feelings of inferiority:

But Freud ignored any negative feelings girls might have about penises and wrote that not only were little girls disappointed to discover that they themselves had no penis, but they also felt disappointed and even contemptuous toward their mothers when they discovered that they, too, lacked this glorious organ. The little girl, he thought, blamed herself and her mother for her own lack of a penis and wondered whether her father's lack of love for her might be related to this 'inferiority' (Caplan 75).

Erika suffers from the feelings of inferiority. We can assume that in her subconscious, she associates her lack of a penis with her father's lack of love towards his daughter. Mutilating her vagina with a razor blade can be an important proof for this argument. She wants a penis, and instead, she has a vagina, so she externalizes her disappointment by cutting her vagina.

During the first pages of the book, Erika attacks her mother and pulls her hair off. This can also be considered as an attack towards the mother, which is made subconsciously because, like Erika, she does not have a penis, and thus she may be

blamed as the culprit behind Erika's lack of a penis. So, Erika instinctively pulls off her hair, the most significant symbol of a woman's beauty, as a revenge for her feelings of inferiority.

We can also consider her harsh and condescending attitudes toward her students, especially Klemmer, as a way to avoid her inferior feelings to feel superior.

Caplan also explains the daughters' relationship with masochism, how they encounter with it and how they act on it while mentioning Rosemary Daniell's opinion on the subject too:

A growing daughter has unlimited occasion to observe her mother in the predicament described in the previous chapter. It is hard for a child to take note of her mother's no-win situation with respect to a "masochistic" role and then make a rational decision to avoid falling into the same trap. She is still subject to most of the same pressures that have weighed on her mother—fear of being thought unfeminine and unnatural if she doesn't embrace a mothering role herself and learn to be self-denying without uttering a word of complaint. The words of Rosemary Daniell, cited at the beginning of this chapter, illustrate the young girl's dilemma of choosing between loss of love and loss of self; in such a situation, most children choose to keep the love. The traditional demand on growing girls to make this choice has meant that they, like their mothers, have been given two

undesirable options and then, in choosing the less self-serving of the two, have been called natural masochists (Caplan, 70).

Caplan's and Daniell's words enable us to reach a better understanding about Erika's love and hate relationship with her mother and why she accepts her mother's restricting, domineering treatment even though she rebels from time to time. By reading the book, we know that from an early age, Erika always follows her mother's instructions and puts up with her restrictions. Therefore, facing the dilemma Daniell mentions, of choosing between loss of love and loss of self, Erika chooses to lose herself to keep the love of her mother.

After the phallic stage, the girl's primary erogenous zone from the infantile clitoris transfers to the adult vagina, during her psychosexual development. Thus, Freud considered the feminine Oedipus attitude (Electra complex) as more emotionally intense than the masculine Oedipal struggle of a boy; possibly resulting in a less confident, submissive personality in a woman. Erika's personality also shows traces of lack of confidence and submission.

In one of her interviews on *The Piano Teacher* with The Austrian Film Commission, Jelinek explains Erika's masculine role in the book:

What interests me in a story is its resonance - in this case the unravelling of one of the women who carry on their backs the high culture that Austria so idolizes. An unlived sexuality expressed in voyeurism: A woman who cannot partake in life or in desire. Even the right to watch is a masculine right, the woman is always the one who is watched,

never the one who watches. In that respect, to express it psychoanalytically, we are dealing here with a phallic woman who appropriates the male right to watch, and who therefore pays for it with her life (Jelinek).

Erika cultivates a parodistic masculinity over the years. She is confused with the aspects of female genitalia and gender. So, she embodies the imitations of sadism, violence, perversion, voyeurism, oppression, cruelty, and penetration.

We can see an implication of this masculinity and confusion in the text where Erika kisses her mother forcefully:

She throws herself upon Mother, showering her with kisses. She kisses Mother in a way in which she has not even thought of kissing her for years. (...) Erika keeps pressing her wet mouth into Mother's face, holding her in steely arms so Mother can't resist. Erika lies halfway, then three-quarters upon Mother, because Mother is starting to flail her arms seriously, trying to thrash Erika. (...) It's like a lovers' struggle, and the goal isn't orgasm, but Mother per se, the person known as Mother. (...) Erika sucks and gnaws on this big body as if she wanted to crawl back in and hide inside it. Erika confesses her love to her mother and Mother gasps out the opposite, (...). Erika's teeth graze down her mother's flesh. She kisses and kisses Mother wildly. Mother calls her daughter's actions disgusting. Erika's lost all control (Jelinek, 232-233).

(...) the daughter reaches toward Mother's body, but Mother shovels Erika's hands away. For a brief moment, Erika managed to see her mother's sparse pubic hair, which closes off the fat belly. (...) During the struggle, the daughter deliberately shoved around in her mother's nightgown, so she could finally see this pubic hair which she has always known was there" (234).

Embodying the father, Erika attempts to gain access to the mother's body as a male substitute.

iii. *Self-harm*

Erika has no sense of personal privacy since she is controlled by her mother all the time. She doesn't know how to be a woman in a sense because her mother does not allow her to learn. She cannot wear even the dresses she buys because of her mother. She has lived under oppression all her life. She definitely does not have a normal life, and always isolated from other people. She has Electra Complex and penis envy. Erika cannot fall in love in the real, normal sense, she cannot feel any joy or pain, or any emotion during her scarce sexual encounters. She is confused about her sexuality, and it is obvious from the text she cannot decide what she wants. One moment, she wants Klemmer to tie her up, punch her in the stomach, sit on her face until she turns black, and another moment, she changes her mind:

Erika wants him to kiss her ardently, not hit her. She says that the act of love can straighten out a lot of things that

seem hopeless. Say something loving to me and forget about the letter, she asks inaudibly (228).

Yet, no matter what, she cannot have a normal relationship with Klemmer. Because she is unable to feel joy, orgasm, and love like normal people – or we can even say like Klemmer – do. As a consequence, she self-harms.

Bereavement, abuse during childhood, and troubled partner or parental relationships are accepted as the principal social factors in the cases of self-harm. There are various motivations for self-harm. It can be used as a coping mechanism so one can feel a brief relief of the emotions such as self-loathing, depression, the sense of failure, anxiety, stress, and emotional numbness. It may become a way of managing and controlling pain, for a person who experienced pain earlier in their life which they had no control over, for instance, being abused. Self-harm can also be a means of feeling something, even though the sensation is painful and unbearable. Sometimes, people who self-harm complain about feelings of emptiness or numbness, so they harm themselves to relieve these feelings since physical pain may provide such a remedy.

It can be understood from the text that all these motivations apply to Erika. She cannot feel joy or pain, so she mutilates herself to feel something. For example, her first close encounter with the opposite sex is with her male cousin, whose penis she sees from up-close. She even brushes her lips on her cousin's penis. She wants to feel something about it, maybe expects to feel some kind of sexual arousal, but she cannot. So, she goes inside the house right after and cuts her arm with the razor blade, just to feel something. Other motivations which cause Erika to mutilate herself are her troubled relationship with her mother, anxiety, depression, and stress. In the last page of the book, for instance,

Erika sees that Klemmer is happy and acting as if he did not beat and rape her, as if nothing happened. Erika's existence was easily erased from his life. That leads Erika to get so furious that she stabs herself with a fruit knife in a public area. She uses self-harm to be in control too because that way, even though she does not have control over the events that happen, she has control over her own pain.

*iii. Giving the control to be in control*

Masochism is a way for Erika to be in control. She has nearly no control over her own life because of her mother. She wears whatever her mother chooses for her, she is not permitted to buy anything for herself, she goes and comes under the permission of her mother, eats whatever her mother cooks, sleeps with her mother in her parents' marriage bed, and thus, she cannot even touch herself, or masturbate to explore her sexuality. The only thing that Erika is in control of is her own body and the pain she inflicts on herself. Therefore, when Klemmer declares that he wants to be with her, she feels the need of writing a letter about what she wants him to do to her. Since Erika is a good observer, a voyeur, she surely knows how young men act: they get bored and leave once they get what they want from women. Because of her age, it is possible for Erika to conclude that she needs to be in control in this relationship so that Klemmer will not leave her. She can only control her pain; therefore, it is logical for her to give the control of inflicting pain on herself to Klemmer. This way, she gives the control without really giving it.

We can see the implications about Erika being in control by giving the control over to Klemmer from the text:

She wavers: Let him decide, she would like to be made utterly immobile. She would like to cede all responsibility to external aids. She wants to entrust herself to someone else, but on her terms. She challenges him! (215)

Klemmer finds it all so funny that he slaps his thighs: She wants to give him orders! And he's supposed to obey her on the spot. She goes on to say that you should describe what you're going to do to me. And threaten me loudly in case I refuse" (217).

Erika also does not speak openly to Klemmer about what she wants, instead, she writes a letter. This letter functions as a masochistic contract; a contract in which the masochist gives consent to her/his partner or the sadist to inflict pain on her/him for the sexual arousal. As Deleuze puts it in his essay *Coldness and Cruelty*, the masochist derives pleasure from the "Contract" because, in this process, he/she can turn another individual into someone heartless, indifferent and cold, and this way, they can control another individual. In the book, we can explicitly see that this is what Erika turns Klemmer into, a sadist.

iv. *Urinating / Urophilia*

Salirophilia is a sexual fetish involving deriving erotic pleasure from the act of disheveling or soiling one's desired object, for instance, an attractive person. Being a form of salirophilia, urophilia is a term for the sexual excitement which emerges at the thought or sight of urination or urine. Urination on oneself, on others or on other objects can be used for an arousal, and this is often tied to the idea of subjugation.

In his quite limited research on urophilia, Dr. Mark Griffiths notes that a 1982 article by a Dr. Denson has one of the most extensive understandings on the subject. According to Dr. Denson, for urophiliacs, urine has a lot of purposes; it can, for example, be used to humiliate somebody or "capture the spirit" of a sexual partner because it is considered as sexy. Urine also is accepted as a sexual object by urophiliacs too. Therefore, it can be associated with the ideas of arousal, power, and humiliation, which can be considered as standard sadomasochistic ideas.

In Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*, there are two urinating scenes described. In the first one, Erika is urinating while secretly watching a Turkish man having sex with an Austrian woman at the park:

Erika Kohut can't stand it anymore. Her need is stronger. She gingerly lets down her panties and pisses on the ground. A warm stream patters down between her thighs to the meadow ground. It ripples upon the soft mattress of twigs, foliage, refuse, filth, and humus. She still doesn't know whether she wants to be discovered or not. Rigidly furrowing her brow, she simply lets the stream run out. She grows emptier and emptier on the inside, and the ground soaks up the fluid. She ponders nothing—no cause and no consequence. She relaxes her muscles, and the initial patter turns into a gentle, steady running. She has stretched the image of the upright, motionless foreigner in the micrometer spindles of her pupils, fixing it there while urinating

vigorously upon the earth. She is ready for either solution, they're both fine with her (148).

In this scene, Erika urinates after watching the couple having sex for a while. This urinating act almost seems like reaching the climax after a sexual arousal. The smell and the dampness after urinating in this first scene are also described:

Nothing is left of the vast Prater meadows aside from a wee bit of dampness on her shoes and between her legs. A slightly sour odor rises from under her skirt, but the cabby probably doesn't notice, (...) (150).

The second time Erika urinates, she has just mutilated the hand of the flutist girl who flirted with Klemmer:

Erika hurriedly settles on the grimy bowl after pushing up the concomitant seat. Others before her have had the same flash of wisdom, so the bowl is probably covered with bacilli. Something is floating in the bowl, but Erika hasn't looked, she's in too much of a hurry. In her state, she'd even squat over a snakepit (174).

In this scene, Erika gets her revenge on the flutist girl who flirted with Klemmer. In a way, Erika calms her jealousy and satisfies her feelings of revenge by mutilating the girl's hand in a sadistic way, and not getting caught. So, the urinating act that follows this satisfaction also seems like a way of reaching the climax.

Right after she starts urinating, Klemmer dashes into the bathroom and hears Erika urinate:

That is why Klemmer now asks: “Erika, are you there?” There is no answer, only a diminishing splash resounds from a stall, an increasingly decreasing noise (175).

After reading these parts of the book, we cannot dismiss the factor of urinating. Thus, we can suggest the novel refers to a form of urophilia, which is exhibited with the orgasm-like emotions Erika has in some moments. It also matches Erika’s masochistic ideas of humiliation, arousal, and power.

### **3. Conclusion**

In her interview with The Austrian Film Commission, Jelinek explains what she sought by writing a character like Erika:

She is certainly not insane, not at all. Neurotic, but not insane. As I just tried to explain, this is all the bloody (in the truest sense of the word) consequence of the fact that a woman is not allowed to live if she claims a right that is not hers and that she obtains only in the rarest of cases: artistic fame. The right to choose a man and also to dictate how he tortures her - that is, domination in submission -- this she is not permitted. Indeed, for a woman almost everything beyond the bearing and raising of children is a presumption. You are not particularly easy on women. That isn't my role. I seek to

cast an incorruptible gaze on women, especially where they are the accomplices of men (Jelinek).

In the same interview, Jelinek also stated that her writing is based on criticism and that it reflects the horrors of the reality, written in sarcastic and analytical ways. When we do a close reading of the book, we see a society that oppresses its women with criteria it approves as “normal”; thus, a woman cannot break the chains imposed by social norms, by her family, even by herself; she cannot dictate to her lover in what ways he can hurt her or love her; she cannot be free in all the ways a man can be free.

In her highly controversial book, *The Piano Teacher*, Jelinek weaves an image of a woman, Erika, with layers of female masochism, sadism, penis envy, Electra Complex, self-mutilation, and fetishism, to criticize her society’s social norms, gender inequality, and parental pressures in the most striking ways. All these layers mentioned above, fit each other perfectly like pieces of a puzzle, making Erika both a Freudian nightmare and one of the most psychologically complex characters literature has ever seen.

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# L'Autre japonaise vue par l'industrie musicale américaine : Appropriation vocale et mutisme

Par Geneviève Cross

## *Résumé*

Cet article examine les représentations orientalistes de la femme japonaise dans les prestations et les vidéoclips de quatre chanteuses populaires (Katy Perry, Nicki Minaj, Gwen Stefani et Avril Lavigne) à la lumière de la théorie d'Edward Said. L'industrie musicale américaine réifie la féminité orientale en suivant deux modèles de représentation : d'une part, les interprètes s'approprient la voix de l'Autre en prenant l'habit de la geisha, associée à une image romantique du Japon prémoderne; d'autre part, elles utilisent les produits culturels du Japon contemporain et ses habitantes comme accessoires rehaussant leur originalité et leur prestige en tant qu'artistes. Dans les deux cas, il n'y a pas de dialogue possible, car l'Autre est un objet silencieux.

Mots clés : orientalisme; Edward Said; vidéoclip; industrie musicale; Japon; États-Unis

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## **1. Introduction : Le Japon comme rival oriental**

Dans la pensée américaine, l'« Autre oriental » évoque surtout l'Extrême-Orient (Said 30). En ce qui a trait au Japon, un discours orientaliste apparaît aux États-Unis suivant l'ouverture de l'archipel au commerce international par le commodore Matthew Perry en 1854, puis par le consul Townsend Harris peu de temps après. Le Japon s'embarque alors dans une ère de modernisation « à l'occidentale », facilitée par les conseillers américains. Dans ces conditions, les États-Unis fondent ce que Yoshihara appelle un « empire informel » en Extrême-Orient (*Embracing the East* 7-9). Pourtant, s'ils se vantaient d'abord d'avoir « rajeuni » le Japon, ils déchantent lorsque celui-ci ressort vainqueur de la guerre russo-japonaise (1904-1905). Les Américains, ayant déjà manifesté leurs ambitions impériales dans le Pacifique avec leur doctrine de la porte ouverte vis-à-vis de la Chine et la conquête des Philippines, se heurtent à cette puissance

navale émergente. La complexité des rapports de pouvoir qui découle de la confrontation entre les empires de l'Ouest et de l'Est surgit dans le regard ambivalent que le premier pose sur le second. Harry D. Harootunian explique que la phase d'américanisation volontaire que connaît le pays du soleil levant après la Première Guerre mondiale est supplantée par une américanisation bien différente après Hiroshima et Nagasaki : « In time, war defeated Japan's America and opened the way for the Occupation's version of an America's Japan » (198-9). Le Japon occupé par les États-Unis est imaginé comme une mariée qui est introduite dans le monde de l'époux, qui la socialise et lui inculque les valeurs du « monde libre » (199-200). D'un autre côté, au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, l'opposition à l'immigration asiatique aux États-Unis s'articule aussi en des termes sexualisés – hommes émasculés et femmes voluptueuses (Yoshihara, *Embracing the East* 7-9). Les couples Ouest-puissance virile et Est-féminité passive permettent d'appivoiser l'Autre dans l'imaginaire collectif et se cristallisent dans l'art, dont l'exemple le plus connu est le récit de John Luther Long, *Madame Butterfly*, adapté en opéra par Puccini.

De nos jours, cette image est encore largement diffusée dans l'industrie musicale en Occident. La présente étude relève les différents modes de représentation de la femme japonaise dans les prestations et les vidéoclips de chanteuses populaires aux États-Unis, de façon à mettre au jour un contenu orientaliste visant à dompter l'Autre et à s'exprimer en son nom. Elle s'insère donc dans la lignée des études postcoloniales et emprunte les concepts saidiens de la représentation de l'Autre et du rapport entre présence et absence. Nous montrerons comment les chanteuses populaires de l'industrie musicale nord-américaine réifient la féminité orientale en suivant deux modèles de représentation, alimentés des stéréotypes datant du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle : d'une part, les interprètes s'approprient

la voix de l'Autre en endossant ses vêtements et en recyclant l'image de la geisha a-historique qui chante son besoin d'être aimée; d'autre part, elles se nourrissent de la culture populaire du Japon contemporain dont elles dépouillent les Japonaises, véritables accessoires humains. Dans les deux cas, il n'y a pas de dialogue possible, car l'Autre est un objet silencieux.

Selon Edward Said, ce que les Occidentaux disent de l'Orient est contaminé par un mode de pensée historique plaçant l'Ouest dans une position de supériorité relativement à l'Est. En des termes simples, l'Orient, c'est l'Autre, et, comme le dirait Jean-Paul Sartre, « [a]utruï, c'est celui qui n'est pas moi et que je ne suis pas » (275). Sartre ajoute que l'Autre est un *objet* que l'on fixe à travers le regard comme une photographie (298). L'Orient *Autre*, parce qu'il est un objet passif, n'est accessible qu'à travers des représentations réductrices. L'Orient est essentialisé : il est étrange, sensuel, exotique. Ces traits « orientaux » ont souvent été associés aux connotations tout aussi stéréotypées du féminin. À l'instar de l'Est, la femme est un être beau mais fragile, mystérieux mais capable de méchanceté. Said remarque qu'en art, la femme orientale « ne parle jamais d'elle-même, elle ne fait jamais montre de ses émotions, de sa présence ou de son histoire », et incarne la domination de l'Ouest, détenteur du droit de parole (36). C'est dire qu'elle est, ironiquement, « toute absence » dans les représentations de l'orientaliste, qui peut *ipso facto* signaler sa propre présence (359). Dans les prestations et les vidéoclips de chanteuses populaires américaines, les Japonaises représentées sont utilisées pour rehausser l'originalité et l'autonomie de la vedette; celle-ci veut faire entendre sa voix à la radio, vouant du même coup l'Autre au silence et à l'invisibilité.

## 2. Corpus et méthodologie

C'est en effet le constat qui émerge de l'analyse de quatre « mises en scène » musicales, soit l'interprétation par Katy Perry de sa chanson « Unconditionally » aux American Music Awards (AMA) en 2013, le vidéoclip de « Your Love » par Nicki Minaj en 2010, la prestation de « Harajuku Girls » par Gwen Stefani à *Sessions@AOL* en 2004 et le vidéoclip paru 10 ans plus tard de la chanson « Hello Kitty » d'Avril Lavigne.

Le vidéoclip – et, par extension, la prestation destinée à la diffusion sur Internet ou à la télévision – est un médium trop souvent ignoré par l'institution académique, qui lui reproche sa fonction ouvertement publicitaire. Pourtant, à l'ère de la mondialisation et de l'explosion des médias sociaux, le vidéoclip est plus visible et accessible que jamais, ce qui en fait le véhicule idéal des idées reçues au sujet des genres et des races (Railton et Watson 2-5). Notre corpus se prête donc à une approche intersectionnelle en raison des images qu'il véhicule d'un groupe ayant été doublement victime de discrimination dans l'histoire des États-Unis : les femmes d'origine asiatique. Spécifiquement, la production vidéographique des quatre artistes américaines (Perry, Minaj, Stefani et Lavigne) reconnues pour avoir eu recours à une imagerie japonaise depuis les années 2000 n'a encore jamais été examinée conjointement. Ainsi, notre analyse complète celle de David C. Oh, qui a exposé le discours orientaliste dans la prestation de Perry aux AMA et dans le vidéoclip de « Hello Kitty » de Lavigne. Ces deux « textes » seront replacés, grâce à de nouveaux concepts, à l'intérieur d'un corpus plus vaste qui inclut des vidéos qui n'ont, à

notre connaissance, jamais fait l'objet d'une recherche académique.<sup>11</sup> Peu importe sa forme, le vidéoclip<sup>12</sup> vise avant tout à légitimer le travail de l'interprète, à confirmer son talent et son statut de vedette (Railton et Watson 52-61). Il n'est donc pas surprenant que dans les vidéos étudiées, les danseuses et les figurantes japonaises jouent un rôle secondaire. Il convient néanmoins d'observer leurs gestes et les autres procédés employés par les chanteuses et leur équipe de production pour définir l'Autre oriental (ici la femme japonaise), le vouer au silence et parler à sa place. Une attention particulière sera accordée aux costumes et aux décors. Des liens entre les éléments visuels et les paroles des chansons seront relevés lorsque cela est pertinent.

Les paragraphes qui suivent situent les quatre vidéos au cœur des débats à propos de l'appropriation culturelle qui secouent fréquemment l'industrie de la musique populaire américaine. Parmi les vidéoclips récents, l'on compte l'appropriation de la culture égyptienne par Katy Perry avec « Dark Horse » (2014) ou celle de la culture indienne par Iggy Azalea dans « Bounce » et par Coldplay et Beyoncé dans « Hymn for the Weekend » (2016). Selon James O. Young et Conrad G. Brunk, l'appropriation culturelle désigne le fait de prendre quelque chose qui est la « propriété » d'une autre culture. Elle est problématique si elle cause un dommage injustifiable ou constitue une attaque à la viabilité ou à l'identité profonde d'une culture (2-5). L'appropriation du sujet (ou de la voix) est un cas particulier d'appropriation culturelle correspondant à la représentation des membres d'une autre culture, qui ne pose d'ailleurs pas toujours

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<sup>11</sup> Rachel Matlow a rédigé en 2007 une thèse de maîtrise sur l'appropriation de la culture japonaise par Gwen Stefani. Toutefois, la prestation que nous analysons dans le cadre de cet article n'est pas considérée par Matlow.

<sup>12</sup> Nous considérons que les prestations de Stefani et de Perry, parce qu'elles sont destinées à la diffusion sur Internet et à la télévision respectivement, empruntent la fonction commerciale du vidéoclip, et donc se plient aux mêmes conventions.

problème (Young et Haley 268). En effet, il n'appartient pas aux Japonais de parler du Japon. Pour cette raison, il est primordial d'accorder une attention particulière aux rapports de force historiques et individuels actualisés dans les représentations de la femme japonaise.

### **3. Pour l'amour de la geisha**

Dans un premier temps, l'appropriation de la voix de l'Autre japonaise survient lorsque celle-ci devient un personnage à incarner. Dans ces cas-là, l'artiste brosse un portrait intemporel du Japon, puisant dans les images traditionnelles (geisha, samouraï, shintoïsme, etc.); l'« essence » de l'Autre est alors « à la fois “historique”, puisqu'elle remonte des profondeurs de l'histoire, et fondamentalement “a-historique”, puisqu'elle fige l'être [...] dans sa spécificité inaliénable et non évolutive » (Abdel-Malek 113). Katy Perry et Nicki Minaj s'autorisent à donner une voix à ce passé.

#### **i. Katy Perry et « Unconditionally »**

Katy Perry livre un spectacle époustouflant lors des American Music Awards de 2013, sur la scène du Nokia Theater L.A. Live (rebaptisé Microsoft Theater) à Los Angeles. Perry chante sa chanson « Unconditionally » entourée d'une dizaine de danseuses. La prestation incorpore des acrobaties, des éventails géants, des effets stroboscopiques et une pluie de fleurs de cerisier. L'épaisseur des signes de la culture japonaise traditionnelle est impressionnante; on les retrouve dans le détail des costumes, dans l'accompagnement musical (*shamisen* et *taiko*) de même que dans les décors (lanternes, portique shintoïste et écrans projetant des images inspirées de la peinture traditionnelle du Japon). Même la végétation du pays est reproduite sur les

planches. Cette représentation reprend tel quel l'ancien cliché américain d'un Japon romantique, « a far-off island empire that was a fairyland of delicate gardens and paper lanterns » (Asada 27). Sadao Asada affirme que ce cliché provient de l'impression qu'avaient les Américains, au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, que le Japon d'avant l'ère Meiji était un pays primitif, simple, en harmonie avec la nature; ainsi, le fantasme de ce « pays des merveilles » traduisait le désir de retrouver un monde « not yet spoiled by the “cruel civilization” of the West » (34). Toutefois, cette représentation d'un Japon paisible est associée à la grâce, la délicatesse et la fragilité; en d'autres mots, elle est féminisée.

Plusieurs aspects de la prestation de Perry corroborent le couple stéréotypé Orient-féminité passive et fragile. Au commencement, Perry est dissimulée derrière un paravent, qui projette sa silhouette. Or, comme l'expliquent Minjeong Kim et Angie Y. Chung, les représentations de la Japonaise hyperféminine servent à exciter le voyeurisme de l'homme blanc américain (75). Devant le paravent, tapies dans l'ombre, deux femmes vêtues de kimonos sont agenouillées. L'une d'entre elles joue du shamisen, tandis que l'autre attend le signal pour glisser le paravent et révéler la vedette à l'assistance. Ainsi, ce sont des symboles d'une féminité douce, docile et discrète, voire invisible, qui inaugurent le spectacle. La chanteuse apparaît enfin, accoutrée d'un pseudo-kimono et imitant les mouvements de la danse traditionnelle des geishas. Oh fait remarquer que son costume évoque une féminité infantile par la prépondérance du rose et les accents mauves et floraux (370). La surabondance des fleurs, qui pleuvent sur la scène et qui ornent même le micro de la chanteuse, amplifie l'aura de féminité fragile que crée la mise en scène.

D'autre part, Oh observe pertinemment que le kimono que porte Perry est contaminé par des éléments caractéristiques du qipao, la robe traditionnelle chinoise, comme l'encolure et l'ouverture le long de la jambe (371). Certes, ces ajustements lui permettent de bouger plus aisément sur scène, mais ont pour résultat une représentation « panasiatique » d'un Orient monolithique; le succès de l'impression japonaise repose sur l'ignorance du public, pour qui les cultures chinoise et japonaise sont interchangeable. « The consumption of Asian culture has never required an accurate comprehension of Asian cultures and histories », écrivent amèrement Kim et Chung (82). Le déguisement final, échancré au-dessus de la poitrine, est, de surcroît, hypersexualisé. À l'opposé, le devant du kimono des danseuses respecte le drapé traditionnel, plus pudique. Le maquillage de celles-ci est également beaucoup plus prononcé : sourcils fortement dessinés au crayon noir, joues roses et ombre à paupières jaune. Les danseuses, d'origines ethniques diverses, sont présentées comme étant plus « orientales » que Perry, qui affiche sa différence par rapport à cet Orient en tant que femme occidentale sexuellement émancipée.

D'ailleurs, les danseuses-geishas ne font pas que se mouvoir en arrière-plan; elles sont là pour servir la vedette : elles accourent vers elle et la suivent à petits pas rapides pour l'encadrer d'éventails rouges et, à la fin de la prestation, tournent le dos à l'assistance pour se prosterner vers l'endroit où Perry disparaît en fumée. Sa présence est ressentie même une fois qu'elle a quitté la scène. Du reste, le geste de prosternation entretient une vision de la femme japonaise soumise. Perry prête sa voix à une Japonaise fictive dans un contexte abreuvé d'idées reçues sur la prétendue féminité de l'Orient, tout en maintenant son individualité et sa force états-unienne. Sa présence est affirmée, tandis

que l'Orient lui-même sert à renforcer cette présence. L'interprète reprend ici l'image classique de la Lotus Blossom, c'est-à-dire de la femme qui est « sexually attractive and alluring and demure, passive, obedient, physically non-imposing, self-sacrificial, and supplicant (especially to white male suitors) » (Ono et Pham 66). À force d'entendre Perry répéter « Unconditional, unconditionally / I will love you unconditionally », le spectateur en vient à associer la femme japonaise, et en particulier la geisha, au don de soi, au sacrifice par amour. Du reste, rien d'autre dans le texte de la chanson ne justifie le thème japonais mis en scène. C'est bien là où le bât blesse : la prestation de Perry perpétue la croyance erronée que les geishas sont des prostituées de luxe. Ce malentendu a pris naissance avec le contact entre les soldats américains et les prostituées, qu'ils appelaient à tort « *geisha-girls* », pendant l'occupation du Japon. Quand ils rentraient à la maison, ces hommes racontaient des histoires sur leurs aventures avec les prostituées, qui sont rapidement devenues emblématiques des geishas et même des Japonaises en général (Akita 12-3). Les sentiments que chante Perry en tant que geisha paraissent encore plus crédibles pour le spectateur, bien familier avec ce discours orientaliste.

ii. Nicki Minaj et « Your Love »

Nicki Minaj, dans le vidéoclip de sa chanson « Your Love », paru en 2010, se met elle aussi dans la peau de la geisha affriolante. La question de l'appropriation culturelle commise par des individus issus de minorités ethniques soulève les passions. Nous pensons, par exemple, au débat récent entourant la chevelure en dreadlocks de Jeremy Lin, un joueur de basketball américain d'origine taïwanaise ayant été accusé d'appropriation culturelle par son confrère afro-américain Kenyon Martin. Par ailleurs, selon Ken McLeod, l'influence de la culture populaire asiatique, et japonaise en

particulier, est plus ressentie dans le monde du hip hop que dans les autres genres musicaux occidentaux et, réciproquement, le rap est aussi très populaire au Japon. Le hip hop et le rap évoluent donc par cycles de métissage et de réappropriations entre l'Est et l'Ouest. Les liens entre les Japonais et les Afro-américains remonteraient à la victoire japonaise sur la Russie au tout début du siècle dernier, « [m]arking the 20<sup>th</sup> century's first instance of a major victory of a colored nation over a white-dominated one » (263). Or, Nicki Minaj, rappeuse née à Trinité-et-Tobago ayant grandi à New York, a déclaré qu'elle puise une part de son inspiration de la culture japonaise. Reconnue pour ses nombreux alter ego, la rappeuse joue parfois le rôle de la « Harajuku Barbie », qui fusionne les normes de la beauté occidentale et le style vestimentaire coloré et éclectique des jeunes du célèbre quartier de Tokyo (“Nicki Minaj Explains ‘Harajuku Barbie’”). Pourtant, c'est une autre époque du pays du soleil levant que la rappeuse présente dans « Your Love ». Si McLeod affirme que les artistes du hip hop américain s'identifient à la culture japonaise au lieu de la « coloniser » (270), ce vidéoclip perpétue tout de même une image du Japon traditionnel héritée du discours orientaliste.

Le vidéoclip narratif s'ouvre sur un tableau de la chanteuse debout au milieu d'une salle drapée de soie rouge, jambes dénudées et pieds chaussés d'*okobo*, les chaussures portées par les apprenties geishas. La sensualité est ostensible. Immédiatement après, Minaj est une élève dans une école d'arts martiaux, dont les six élèves se pâment devant le maître, joué par Michael Jai White, qui n'a d'yeux que pour la rappeuse. Le spectateur voit ensuite Minaj accoutrée d'une perruque de geisha et d'un haut rouge, dont les manches et le drapé rappellent un kimono malgré le décolleté profond, assorti d'une petite culotte de la même couleur. S'insérant dans la tradition de *Madame Butterfly*, elle

reprend le cliché de la geisha subordonnée à l'homme et capable d'un amour infini alors qu'elle chante des paroles infantilissantes : « You're like a candy store / And I'm a toddler / You've got me wantin' more and mo mo more of / Your love, your love ». Plus tard, devant son prétendant déguisé en samouraï, Minaj gardera les yeux au sol, symbole parfait de féminité soumise et fragile. Encore une fois, ceci correspond davantage à la conception occidentale et erronée des geishas comme prostituées de luxe qu'à la vérité historique. Pourtant, comme le rappelle Said, « il y a le motif de l'Orient comme danger insinuant. La rationalité est minée par le caractère "excessif" de l'Orient » (115). Dans son costume de geisha rouge, les doigts de la main gauche de Minaj sont parés de longues griffes métalliques. L'amoureuse japonaise est lascive et dangereuse, car elle est guidée par sa passion, annoncée par les étoffes écarlates. En effet, torturée par la jalousie, une autre élève de l'école d'arts martiaux, interprétée par une Américaine d'origine antillaise, la tuera d'un coup d'épée. Les deux rivales sont alors affublées de combinaisons noires moulantes évoquant vaguement les *ninja*.

Dans ces conditions, le vidéoclip de « Your Love » illustre les deux clichés contradictoires du Japon qui circulaient dès le début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle aux États-Unis, à savoir l'image romantique de la Lotus Blossom et le « péril jaune », personnifié par la Dragon Lady. D'une part, Minaj, comme Perry, se sert de la féminité japonaise pour raconter une histoire d'amour. Le kimono blanc que porte la chanteuse devant son amant pendant un bref instant puis sa mort tragique consolident ce portrait sentimental. D'autre part, l'ennemie de Minaj et Minaj elle-même, avec ses griffes et son talent martial, incarnent la « Dragon Lady », que Kent A. Ono et Vincent N. Pham décrivent comme étant « untrustworthy, deceitful, conniving, and plotting, and she may use sex or sexuality

to get what she wants, including the object of her sexual desire » (66). Ce modèle de représentation du Japon tire sa source de la crainte ressentie par les États-Unis (nommée « péril jaune ») face à l'impérialisme de cette puissance de l'Est qui s'accélère avec l'invasion japonaise de la Mandchourie en 1931 (Asada 28). Dans le vidéoclip, les deux personnages féminins principaux adoptent non seulement la féminité « orientale » stéréotypée, mais aussi le côté militaire et menaçant du Japon lorsqu'elles se battent en duel.

Du reste, les arts martiaux illustrés dans le vidéoclip sont difficilement identifiables. L'uniforme des apprenties ressemble à celui du kung fu Shaolin, un art chinois. Cependant, les jeunes filles fendent des blocs de béton avec leur main, une pratique sensationnelle (et peu répandue) du taekwondo coréen ou du karaté japonais. L'interchangeabilité des signes asiatiques est mise en évidence par la rime « When I was a Geisha he was a Samurai / Somehow I understood him when he spoke Thai ». Le Japon que Minaj évoque est ouvertement retouché pour créer une image grandiose et sympathique de la vedette; à la fin de la vidéo, celle-ci apparaît comme une femme puissante et émancipée, mais aussi tendre et vulnérable. Ainsi, Nicki Minaj invente la voix de l'Autre en se mettant littéralement dans ses chaussures, tout en privant de parole et de pouvoir d'action les quatre figurantes d'origine asiatique du vidéoclip, qui sont symboliquement absentes. Leur rôle accessoire se limite à contempler avec envie le maître d'arts martiaux et à regarder les deux ennemies jurées casser des blocs de béton.

#### **4. La Japonaise comme accessoire *kawaii***

D'autres musiciennes ont utilisé des Japonaises comme accessoires muets pour agrémenter leurs productions. Il apparaît clairement dans ce type de représentation de

l'Autre que « la relation entre l'Occident et l'Orient est une relation de pouvoir et de domination » (Said 35). Gwen Stefani et Avril Lavigne n'enfilent pas d'habits traditionnels; elles *consomment* plutôt les produits de la culture populaire japonaise contemporaine. Cette tendance s'inscrit dans une nouvelle vague de japonophilie, qui, selon Roland Kelts, se caractérise par un intérêt pour le côté extravagant et futuriste du Japon : mangas, *anime*, Nintendo, Hello Kitty, etc. (5-6). L'Autre japonais est *cool*, et l'artiste qui consomme cette culture est *cool* par procuration.

Il faut comprendre que les cultures populaires japonaise et américaine s'influencent l'une l'autre depuis l'après-guerre. Les bases militaires qui occupent une part non négligeable de l'archipel et les chaînes de restauration rapide, les grandes marques, la musique et le cinéma américains font en sorte que les États-Unis sont très visibles au Japon aujourd'hui (Kelts 4). En même temps, le phénomène *otaku*, qui désigne les passionnés de manga et de dessins animés japonais, a traversé les frontières nationales et existe maintenant en Occident. Pourtant, ces échanges culturels sont déséquilibrés par les forces inégales en jeu. Si l'on considère encore le cas des mangas et des dessins animés japonais, ceux-ci tirent en fait leur origine des bandes dessinées et des dessins animés américains qui ont été introduits au Japon entre les années 1950 et 1970 puis ont subi plusieurs transformations, aboutissant vers un produit à l'allure typiquement japonaise. Cet exemple d'hybridation culturelle, selon Hiroki Azuma, est intimement lié à la position d'« extrême infériorité » du Japon au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale : « [A]près la disparition du “beau vieux Japon” à la suite de sa défaite dans la guerre, il s'agit de recréer un pseudo-Japon à partir d'éléments venus d'Amérique » (27-9). Par conséquent, il est impératif, dans le cadre de notre analyse, de garder à l'esprit le

contexte dans lequel se réalisent les appropriations de la culture japonaise, bien qu'elles puissent paraître réciproques.

i. Gwen Stefani et « Harajuku Girls »

Gwen Stefani s'est présentée comme une grande japonophile depuis la sortie de son album *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* en 2004, dont le titre fait référence aux noms de scène de ses quatre danseuses japonaises, les Harajuku Girls, qui la suivaient en tournée et même en entrevue. « Harajuku Girls » est d'ailleurs une chanson de l'album, que la chanteuse californienne a interprétée en 2004 à *Sessions@AOL*. L'enregistrement fait office de vidéoclip, car il a été réalisé en studio dans le but d'être diffusé sur Internet.

Au début de la prestation, la vedette est assise sur un trône sur lequel sont accrochées une couronne et une fourrure d'hermine. Elle tient dans ses mains un sceptre. Autour de Stefani, les Harajuku Girls sont les fidèles sujets qui viennent compléter ce tableau royal. Celles-ci prennent bien soin de ne pas regarder la caméra, de manière à effacer leur présence au profit de leur reine. Puis, Stefani est debout au centre de la pièce, dont le mur du fond reproduit le motif de la fourrure d'hermine, tandis que les Japonaises se prosternent devant elle. Si la domination de Stefani n'était pas déjà suffisamment évidente, les minuscules danseuses ont un bon pied de moins que la chanteuse, perchée au sommet de chaussures très hautes. L'équilibre dans les échanges n'est visiblement pas recherché. Dès la première ligne, « There's me, there's you », un mur infranchissable entre l'Occident et l'Orient est érigé. Le reste de la prestation se déroule en conformité avec un discours orientaliste établissant clairement la distinction entre « nous » et « les autres ».

En outre, les Harajuku Girls portent toutes le même uniforme d'écolière gris et n'arborent pas le style extravagant que Stefani vante dans sa chanson – « Harajuku Girls you got the wicked style », chante-t-elle. En fait, cette sous-culture vestimentaire est très complexe et se subdivise en de nombreux styles, incluant l'esthétique *kawaii*, que Christine R. Yano qualifie de « *cute overload* », soit un amalgame d'accessoires excentriques et colorés (barrettes cache-oreilles, chaussettes, sacs, poupées, etc.), le rose étant particulièrement prisé (681). Les Harajuku Girls, dans la prestation à *Sessions@AOL*, sont plutôt habillées à la mode *kogal* (écolière). L'écolière est d'ailleurs reconnue pour faire l'objet d'un fétichisme sexuel au Japon; elle est bien présente dans la pornographie et le *hentai*, de même que dans l'industrie du sexe (Miller 227). Ce fétichisme des jeunes filles par des hommes d'âge mûr porte le nom de *rorikon*, ou « complexe de Lolita ». Or, il existe également un style *rorii* (ou « Lolita »), qui s'inspire des vêtements des poupées victoriennes. Les jeunes Japonaises qui adoptent cette mode font preuve d'une grande créativité et y apportent toutes sortes de variations : Lolita « sweet », punk, gothique ou grotesque, cette dernière étant habituellement recouverte de faux sang et de bandages. En exagérant la féminité ou en inventant une esthétique subversive de l'« anti-*kawaii* », elles critiquent, parodient et transforment les normes de genre qui leur sont imposées (21-3). Rachel Matlow résume bien l'importance sociale de la mode dont parle Stefani : « Cute culture is about avoiding controlled societal adult obligations, prolonging youth, and rebelling from the moral demand of self-discipline. [...] [I]t is also an active form of empowerment and agency » (65). Dans ces conditions, il est significatif que le style affiché par les danseuses de Stefani soit celui qui est le plus directement associé à une sexualité juvénile (la *kogal*), tandis que Stefani elle-même

incorpore à sa tenue des éléments de la Lolita, comme le bleu pastel et les jarretelles. Il ne reste que les grandes boucles dans les cheveux des Harajuku Girls pour signaler un soupçon d'expérimentation esthétique.

Said note pertinemment que l'Autre est le « rival culturel » de l'Occident (30). La musicienne est en train de livrer « a ping-pong match between Eastern and Western », comme le dit la chanson : pour gagner le concours de mode contre les Japonaises, elle doit s'approprier la culture et dépouiller l'Autre de sa parole et de son pouvoir d'action. Les Harajuku Girls sont donc, selon l'expression de Said, « des ombres muettes » que Stefani doit « animer, amener à la réalité » (359). Par exemple, vers le milieu de la prestation, les quatre Japonaises se tiennent immobiles, puis s'animent au toucher de Stefani, répondant à ses ordres : « Work it, express it, live it, command your style / Create it, design it. » Ceci donne l'impression au spectateur que les danseuses existent seulement dans le regard de la vedette. Cette dernière est aussi en position d'accorder ou de retirer le droit de parole aux Japonaises. Toutefois, quand Stefani tend le micro à l'une d'elles, ce sont des mots préenregistrés que l'on entend (« *Super kawaii* »), comme si elle était une adorable marionnette de ventriloque. Matlow constate que « Stefani's fetishization of her Harajuku Girls [...] reinforces old-fashioned Orientalist ideas of Asian women as exotic, subservient, mysterious, sexual, docile, and homogeneous » (27). Si Stefani est réellement une fan de la culture japonaise, pourquoi ne laisse-t-elle pas ses danseuses prononcer les mots en japonais ou s'exprimer par leur style?

ii. Avril Lavigne et « Hello Kitty »

Le vidéoclip de la chanson « Hello Kitty » d'Avril Lavigne, filmé à Tokyo et paru en 2014, rappelle les Harajuku Girls aux spectateurs qui se souviennent des années de

gloire de Gwen Stefani. Il est vrai que Lavigne est canadienne, mais, étant donné qu'elle a déménagé aux États-Unis après ses études secondaires pour embrasser sa carrière de chanteuse, il est tout à fait acceptable d'envisager sa production musicale au sein de l'industrie musicale américaine.

Ce vidéoclip s'articule en deux parties alternées. D'une part, le spectateur voit une vidéo narrative qui suit le parcours d'une touriste surexcitée à travers Tokyo : Lavigne visite la ville, elle mange des sushis, boit du saké et prend des photos avec son appareil Fujifilm. D'autre part, le vidéoclip simule une prestation, filmée sur un plateau de tournage. David C. Oh a relevé l'excès de féminité infantile dans les décors, qui contribue à l'essentialisation du Japon comme un milieu hyperféminin. Les couleurs sont vivantes et le rose est prépondérant. Partout où se pose le regard du spectateur, il trouve des petits gâteaux, des bonbons, des cœurs ou des ballons gonflés à l'hélium. De plus, les paroles de la chanson participent à l'élaboration de cet univers de préadolescente avec la répétition des mots « *Kawaii* »<sup>13</sup> et « Hello Kitty », de même qu'avec la référence à un « slumber party » et à une bataille d'oreillers. Oh note également le double sens du mot « kitty », désignant explicitement le personnage célèbre de Sanrio à l'allure féline, mais aussi les organes génitaux féminins (« Come play with Kitty and me ») (374).

En outre, la sexualité infantile qui est représentée dans « Hello Kitty » rappelle étrangement le dialogue entre Mrs. Pinkerton et Cho-Cho-San dans *Madame Butterfly*. Dans le récit de Long, Cho-Cho-San tombe amoureuse d'un officier américain stationné au Japon et donnera naissance à son enfant; entre-temps, l'officier rentre chez lui aux États-Unis. Plus tard, son épouse, Mrs. Pinkerton, ira à la rencontre de la Japonaise pour

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<sup>13</sup> On traduit généralement « *kawaii* » par « mignon », mais ce mot est également utilisé dans un sens plus général, se rapprochant de l'anglais « *cool* ».

récupérer l'enfant. La femme blanche s'adresse à son interlocutrice en ces termes : « “How very charming – how *lovely* – you are, dear! Will you kiss me, you pretty – *plaything!*” » (cité dans Yoshiharai, *Embracing the East* 4). Le vocabulaire de « Hello Kitty » est très similaire : « Don't go Kitty Kitty / *Play* with me [...] / Hello Kitty, you're so *pretty*. » Cette façon condescendante de s'adresser à l'Autre comme l'on s'adresse à un enfant, tout en reconnaissant le pouvoir séducteur de son innocence, est déroutante. La chanteuse se place au-dessus de son interlocutrice, qu'elle prend pour un jouet dans un « terrain de jeu exotique » (Oh 374).

En plus d'être féminisé, infantilisé et sexualisé, le Japon représenté dans le vidéoclip de Lavigne est déshumanisé par la présence de quatre danseuses japonaises identiques dont le visage n'affiche aucune expression. Leur costume, constitué d'une perruque rouge foncé, d'un chandail à manches longues blanc, d'une culotte courte bleue, de bas nylons roses et de bretelles assorties, ne tient pas spécifiquement de la mode japonaise. À l'opposé, l'esthétique punk de Lavigne est visiblement révisée pour inclure des éléments du style Lolita (mèches pastel, jarretelles, petits gâteaux sur la jupe). Comme Perry et Stefani, Lavigne marque sa différence par rapport à l'Orient. Elle expérimente avec la culture japonaise, arrachée du dos de ses danseuses. Celles-ci n'ont pas d'identité propre ni de pouvoir d'action. De plus, leurs mouvements robotiques contrastent avec les gestes beaucoup plus fluides et « vivants » de la vedette. Par conséquent, l'image de l'Autre japonaise qui est offerte au spectateur confirme le discours « techno-orientaliste » qui présente le Japon comme un pays froid et insensible, peuplé de travailleurs obsédés par la technologie et par l'efficacité. Il s'agit, en vérité, de la version contemporaine du « péril jaune » : durant la deuxième moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, le

pays a maintenu « an image of technological progressiveness and mastery that has outstripped that of [...] almost any other nation », ce qui en fait le rival des États-Unis (McLeod 260). L'image prémâchée d'un Japon robotique implique la « supériorité » de la chanteuse par rapport à l'Orient, qu'elle enferme de son regard. C'est ce que suggère l'épisode où elle photographie ses danseuses, qui auront enfin l'occasion de voir l'image que l'Occidentale se fait d'elles – ce qui leur décroche un bref sourire, le seul de tout le vidéoclip.

Lavigne cherche avant tout à vendre *sa* chanson, qui est le but de tout vidéoclip; elle n'a donc pas intérêt à faire de la publicité pour la culture populaire japonaise. De ce fait, l'Autre en est exclu. Bien que le vidéoclip ait été filmé à Tokyo, le résultat final laisse très peu voir la mégapole; c'est plutôt dans un studio que la plupart des scènes se déroulent. Les Japonais eux-mêmes sont significativement sous-représentés. Il n'y a aucun client dans le magasin de bonbons ni dans le restaurant que Lavigne visite. Le spectateur aperçoit un cuisinier dans le restaurant, mais son visage est presque invisible, car sa tête reste penchée sur son ouvrage. En revanche, vers la fin du vidéoclip, la chanteuse est montrée à la tête d'une procession dans la rue, suivie de près par ses danseuses impassibles, puis par quelques figurantes japonaises. Ces dernières sont toutefois embrouillées, car Lavigne remplit la quasi-totalité du cadre. Il devient évident que les Japonaises sont pour la vedette un moyen simple et efficace pour faire ressortir sa popularité. De cette façon, Oh tombe dans un piège lorsqu'il conclut que l'accumulation exagérée des images stéréotypées du Japon dans la vidéo « becomes a critique of the U.S. popular imagination of Japan as a postmodern, techno-Orientalist space » (376). Lavigne, en englobant l'esthétique *kawaii* de manière à offrir un produit nouveau et alléchant à

son public occidental, ne donne pas la chance à Tokyo et à ses habitantes de dévoiler leurs attraits.

## 5. Conclusion

L'analyse de quatre vidéoclips et prestations de chanteuses populaires américaines a montré que la représentation des femmes japonaises est encore de nos jours calquée sur le modèle orientaliste qui s'est développé au tournant du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Katy Perry, Nicki Minaj, Gwen Stefani et Avril Lavigne offrent toutes à leur public occidental une image hyperféminine et sexualisée du Japon. Celui-ci devient un accessoire qui leur permet s'affirmer en tant que femmes occidentales émancipées, mais aussi de se différencier des autres artistes qui leur font compétition. Comme l'explique bell hooks à propos de l'appropriation culturelle :

Within current debates about race and difference is the contemporary location [...] that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference. [...] Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. (21)

En particulier, l'appropriation vocale et la réification de la féminité japonaise à des fins pratiques s'effectuent suivant deux modèles. Premièrement, Perry et Minaj recyclent une image romantique du Japon prémoderne en prenant l'habit de la geisha, qu'elles associent à un amour pur, inconditionnel et tragique. Dans ces cas-là, les chanteuses ne se soucient guère de la vérité historique, car c'est leur propre vision fantasmagorique du pays du soleil levant qui est mise à profit pour exprimer leur individualité. Deuxièmement, Stefani et Lavigne se tournent plutôt vers un Japon contemporain, qui apparaît comme le rival culturel menaçant des États-Unis. Pour cette

raison, l'Autre orientale doit être domptée et bâillonnée. Tout en intégrant à leur esthétique personnelle les produits originaux de la culture populaire japonaise, elles s'entourent de danseuses asiatiques homogènes, silencieuses et dociles. Dans tous les cas, les Japonaises elles-mêmes sont quasi absentes des vidéoclips et des prestations; on les dépouille de leur culture et de leur pouvoir créateur. Le dialogue entre l'Est et l'Ouest est impossible, car la distinction entre les deux est constamment réitérée.

Bien entendu, cette étude comporte ses limites. Elle a fait allusion à la complexité des échanges culturels entre le Japon et les États-Unis et a résumé l'origine des grands préjugés américains à l'égard de leur rival oriental. Néanmoins, il n'a pas été question de l'image auto-orientaliste que le Japon exporte de façon volontaire. En effet, le gouvernement japonais fait face à certaines critiques, car on lui reproche de miser sur la culture des jeunes, en particulier l'esthétique *kawaii* hyperféminine, dans sa politique internationale (Yano 684-5). Par exemple, en 2009, le ministère des Affaires étrangères a nommé trois femmes au poste de « Trend Communicators of Japanese Pop Culture », surnommées les ambassadrices du *kawaii* et incarnant les trois styles vestimentaires emblématiques de la culture des jeunes : la *kogal*, l'adolescente de Harajuku et la Lolita (Miller 20). Dans ces conditions, il conviendrait de comparer les représentations de la femme japonaise dans les vidéoclips américains avec l'image de leur propre féminité que proposent les chanteuses populaires du Japon. Par ailleurs, d'autres types d'appropriation culturelle par l'industrie de la musique populaire américaine pourraient être étudiés à titre comparatif. Par exemple, la culture chinoise inspire elle aussi un grand nombre d'artistes. C'est le cas notamment de Coldplay et de Rihanna dans leur vidéoclip de « Princess of China » (2012) et de John Mayer avec « Still Feel Like Your Man » (2017).

L'appropriation culturelle dans les vidéoclips suscite à tout coup des débats chaleureux. Il ne faut pas oublier que les chanteurs et les chanteuses, sans être nécessairement mal intentionnés, savent que la controverse fera augmenter les ventes de leurs albums. Difficile de dire alors si les stéréotypes orientalistes sont toujours fermement enracinés dans l'industrie musicale américaine ou s'ils ne subsistent qu'à des fins publicitaires.

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# Narcissism and Cultural Liberation

## A Textual and Cultural Analysis of Carol Shields’ “Mirrors”

By Rebecca Good

### *Abstract*

This paper will analyze Carol Shields’ short story “Mirrors” in the collection *Dressing Up for the Carnival*. The paper will explore how the absence of mirrors in the story creates a break in narcissism, which liberates the characters from cultural impositions. This will be done using Jonathan Culler’s “Narrative” to analyze the parts of the plot where mirrors appear, or where the couple mirrors each other. The analysis will utilize the psychoanalytical and cultural underpinnings of Freud, Lacan, Lunbeck, Friedman, and Adorno and Horkheimer. Through the breaks in narcissism, the characters are liberated from the cultural impositions of vanity, fashion, marriage, and beauty, among others. Finally, the aspects of narcissism inherent in the setting and internal dialogue of the characters will be examined.

**Key words:** Shields, mirrors, identity, culture, narcissism, uncanny, Narcissus

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### 1. Introduction: Carol Shields and “Mirrors”

Carol Shields’ short story “Mirrors” is about a couple’s marriage to each other over a thirty-five-year time span, and their decision not to have any mirrors in their summer house (450). This deliberate act of mirrorlessness and the season of nonreflectiveness is justified by an innate need of appearance: “The need to observe ourselves is sewn into us, everyone knows this, but he and his wife have turned their backs on this need...” (Shields 450). As noted by Dvorak, “[Shields’] writing, rooted in everydayness, is profoundly metaphorical” (Dvorak 3). Thus, the story delves into the

ideas of self-identity in the absence of the mirrors but in the presence of another person, and the experience of the couple ultimately seeing themselves in each other (Kruk 122).

Carol Shields was a Canadian author who studied at the University of Ottawa and wrote a plethora of literary works throughout her lifetime (Staines, ed. 2-3). The story “Mirrors” can be found in Shields’ publication entitled *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, which includes a collection of short stories concerning the ideas of gender, identity, and the carnival (Kruk 121). Shields is famous for her “interest in materiality, particularly the everyday, the small scale and a carefully realized world of the family, the married couple, the close friends. But the everyday is often defamiliarised” (Eagleton, Mary 70). Throughout her writing and short stories, especially within *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, Shields incorporates both modernism and postmodernism to manipulate the characters and their daily lives, as well as the various themes within her stories:

At the core of Shields's writing, then, is a paradigm characteristic of modernism suggesting a supra-reality beyond the senses, deeply concerned with figuration and representation, or the order of the world. But this vertical mode is enmeshed with a horizontal one characteristic of postmodernism: it is concerned not with re/presentation, but with the *presentation* of a world through the "*parallel realities*" of fiction (Dvorak 2).

In the story “Mirrors”, as can be inferred from the title, mirrors are defamiliarised and their tropes of reflection and identity are inverted. Similarly, the characters in the story are relatable for a wide audience—an old married couple with a summer house at the lake and grown, married children. Using the summer house as the backdrop of the story, and

mirrors as the focal point, Shields creates a short story closely linked to modernism, as are the themes within the story.

“Mirrors”, as analyzed using Jonathan Culler’s chapter “Narrative” in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, uses third person omniscient narration with an alternating focalization between the two main characters, a husband and wife. The story focuses on their life at their summer house, from their early marriage to their life with grown children (Shields 459). The textual analysis of this story will be emphasized through a cultural analysis of identity and narcissism. My approach to the story, in line with cultural studies, seeks to shed light on “the problematical character of identity and to the multiple ways in which identities are formed, experienced, and transmitted” (Culler 45). In the story, this formation, experience, and transmission are experienced through the absence of mirrors in the summer house. The focus of “Mirrors” in this paper will include a textual and cultural analysis discussing the connections between identity and culture, specifically narcissism as is noted below.

## **2. Theoretical Approach and Objective**

The history of the mirror in myth and culture relates to identity and individualism. The invention of mirrors led to “new conceptions of individuality...” in society, culture, and literature (Rahimi 455). The mirror is a reminder of the reflection of the self; it allows people to discover who they are and to find boundaries in their life — it creates a sense of self (Elkisch 242). This sense of self in the reflection of the mirror is related to the idea of narcissism. Róheim examines the significance of the mirror across different cultures, and notes that the “superstitions and taboos betray man’s unconscious awareness

of the insidious dangers of a narcissistic fixation and an attempt at protection against it” (Elkisch 239). A person is unaware of the narcissistic nature of their reflection in the mirror. Therefore, the mirror has created a new idea in society and culture of the individual self which has ultimately led to cultural narcissism: “The ‘narcissistic requirement’ to maintain one’s positive self-feeling ‘plays a part in everything,’... and shaped individuals as powerfully as did the better recognized drives of sexuality and aggression” (Lunbeck 28). Narcissism is dangerously inherent in society as it allows people to maintain a positive self-image and understand their own identity. The mirror in itself is a type of cultural object, and the absence of mirrors in Carol Shields’ story indicates a “resistance to the commodifying and objectifying social gaze” (Kruk 122). I contend that, the characters in the story are resisting cultural narcissism through eliminating mirrors from their summer house. Therefore, in Carol Shields’ short story “Mirrors”, the absence of mirrors creates a break in narcissism, which liberates the characters from cultural impositions. The story’s form, its rhetorical composition, reflects the sense of liberation through the erasure of identity markers and character’s actions in the absence of mirrors.

This break in narcissism that will be argued in this paper positions “Mirrors” as an anti-Narcissus myth. According to Mark Carthwright: “Narcissus is a figure from Greek mythology who was so impossibly handsome that he fell [*sic*] in love with his own image reflected in a pool of water.” In “Mirrors”, the characters deliberately eliminate mirrors from their summer house, leaving no chance at seeing their reflection and falling into narcissism. Ventura explains that “Mirrors” is in fact an anti-Narcissus myth as it replaces self-love with secular marriage: “Shields’s treatment of the motif in the mirror

is ambiguous: she explicitly includes a reference to the myth of Narcissus in the narrative, yet a number of major divergences in the development of the plot invite us to reconsider the story and contemplate it as a possible anti-Narcissus myth” (Ventura 206). Furthermore, Shields includes a reference to the Narcissus myth within the story through the contemplation of looking *into* a mirror, and how the first mirrors were water, which started with Narcissus (Shields 457). Yet at the same time, “Shields’s treatment of the motif in the mirror is ambiguous: she explicitly includes a reference to the myth of Narcissus in the narrative, yet a number of major divergences in the development of the plot invite us to reconsider the story and contemplate it as a possible anti-Narcissus myth” (Ventura 206). Therefore, textual elements signal a divergence from the Narcissus themes of self-love and self-absorption.

Finally, the story “Mirrors” will be examined through a psychoanalytical approach as well as a cultural approach. First, the story will be analyzed using Freud’s idea of narcissism. This state is “one characterized by a lack of inner experience, or, more correctly, of the kind of experience that defines the self as an autonomous being” (Friedman 171). In essence, narcissism is selfishness, self-centeredness, and an excessive interest in oneself or one’s appearance (Oxford Dictionary of English). Second, several examples from the story will be analyzed using Freud’s *The Uncanny*, or “that which is familiar, of the self and known to the self, yet supposed to remain hidden from the self, but has become apparent, has become visible to the self” (Rahimi 459). Essentially, it is the idea of seeing the familiar in something unfamiliar, which can create fear in an individual (Ferré 43). Third, “Mirrors” will be examined using Lacan’s aptly-named mirror stage. The mirror stage is the first development of an ego or an integrated self-

image (Eagleton 143). The function of the mirror stage is to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality (443). It is essentially a step in the process of forming the ego and one's identity. Therefore, the psychoanalytic analysis of "Mirrors" will include narcissism, the uncanny, and the mirror stage.

### **3. Literary Form and Cultural Liberation**

Alex Ramon discusses the themes inherent throughout Shields' stories and writing. He suggests that the stories in *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, "...are most closely connected by the *loss* of "ordinary items," by the trope of absence, and by an *exploration* of the strategies devised by protagonists to bear the lacks and deficiencies which characterize their lives" (Ramon 151). In "Mirrors", the mirrors as ordinary items are absent by the choice of the characters, who find ways of living without mirrors at the summer house. Furthermore, "[Shields'] work frequently explores the challenge of human endurance and the necessity of finding daily consolation" (Ramon 151). The characters find consolation in the absence of mirrors because the mirrors liberate the couple from cultural impositions. This elimination of mirrors is reflected in the plot through the absence of identity markers. According to Kruk, the characters are "...nameless protagonists whose insight...extends to the implied author or narratee..." (131). The reader never finds out the names of the characters, and their thoughts and actions are all dictated through an omniscient narrator, an implied author. There is no place marker, other than the fact that the cottage is on "Big Circle Lake" (Shields 451). Furthermore, there are no dates involved in the plot; the reader has to infer from the setting and cultural references in the story as to the time period in which the story takes place. At the summer house, these identity markers are lost along with the mirrors, a

symbol of reflection, culture, and identity: “Mirrors have apparently been eradicated from the narrated space: they seem to exist only in the act of narration through the reference to their elimination” (Ventura 206). Therefore, the couple is now outside the impositions placed on them by culture, and they can reflect on themselves through the reflection of the other person rather than a mirror. Considering that there is a loss of identity markers, and allowance for reflection outside the parameters of culture, the couple experiences a rupture of narcissism inherent in the cultural presence of mirrors.

#### **4. Textual Analysis**

The first example in the story regarding the absence of mirrors is when the wife discusses the pocket mirror. Told by the omniscient narrator and focalized through the wife, she remembers how new purses used to come with a small, crude mirror wrapped in tissue: “they were... like compasses; you could look into them and take your bearings. Locate yourself in the world” (Shields 457). This example is connected with gender and identity. The mirror allows women to locate themselves in society and in culture—to find themselves: “But this location is superficial, because you can only see your social position by your outward appearance; your soul is concealed” (Girod 4). Mirrors conceal the real “self” by a focus on outward appearances and defining the “self” according to that appearance; the wife specifies that only women are concerned with mirrors, which is connected to vanity. According to Lunbeck, narcissism is “closely intertwined with a critique of American consumerism” and “characteriz[ed] the unseemly self-regard of American women...by...advertisers appealing to their vanity” (14-15). Therefore, vanity is a cultural construction aimed at the female population. Vanity is a characteristic of narcissism and connects back to the story of Narcissus where he cannot stop staring at his

reflection in the pool (Cartwright, Mark). At the summer house in the absence of mirrors, the wife is liberated from the culture of vanity and narcissism because she has no mirror, and this eliminates her narcissism regarding her appearance, specifically with the example of the swimsuit, which I examine next.

The second example in the story is when the wife discusses how she walks around the house in her swimsuit without the concern that she will have to see her reflection in a mirror (Shields 453). This story is once again focalized through the wife. The mirror is synonymous with the cultural idea of fashion and gender. Fashion allows people to express their identity; however, there is societal pressure to be skinny and perfect. Lunbeck discusses in her chapter “The Culture of Narcissism” how “the ‘psychic feeling of self’ could encompass not only the body but also clothing and other like property, all of which could enhance one’s ego-feeling and contribute to the narcissistic pleasure of an enlarged self-compass.” (Lunbeck 30). The absence of mirrors liberates the wife from the cultural imposition of fashion and property, allowing her to identify with her feelings of liberation rather than the narcissistic pleasure created by society. At the same time, Kruk states that there is a “complicity in social construction, beyond the ‘surface’ removal of these reflective tools” (132). There is an absence of mirrors in the cottage, however the ideas of the cultural impositions remain around the pressure to be skinny and perfect, namely when the wife sees the thin waitresses in the restaurant, as will be explained below (Shields 456). At the same time, the cultural ideals of beauty and perfection need not concern the wife at the cottage as there are no mirrors with which to view her imperfect body, narcissistic fission when the wife finally feels comfortable in her own skin.

The third scene is once again seen through the wife, but told through the omniscient narrator. The wife sees her reflection in a mirror in a restaurant and does not recognize herself—she is a stranger to herself: “A moment ago she had felt a pinprick of envy for the lithe careless bodies of the young waitresses. Now she was confronted by this stranger” (Shields 456). The wife was feeling envious of the thin waitresses, as the wife has always struggled with her weight (Shields 456). However, at the moment when the wife sees her reflection she does not recognize herself, but instead needs to identify with someone else in order to locate herself in the world. Kruk explains that the restaurant scene is a moment of potential narcissism when the wife is stressing the other within the self (134). She is looking inward in a self-centered way, creating an interest in herself through the other. Furthermore, this is an example of Freud’s “The Uncanny” when the wife sees something unfamiliar within something familiar, herself: “The psychoanalyst writes that ‘the uncanny’ is that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Martín 43). The image reflected in the restaurant mirror shocks the wife who sees a stranger in own reflection, this creates a double through the conflict of the self and the other: the recognition of self and the appearance in the mirror of the stranger, the other. Ernst Jentsch describes the experience of the uncanny as “the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him” (8). In this case, the wife’s own identity is foreign to her, in the season of non-reflectiveness, her identity had been set aside (Ventura 210). Therefore, the restaurant scene brings back the narcissism inherent in the cultural reflection of the other, reinforcing the idea that the absence of mirrors in fact challenges narcissism through a liberation from cultural impositions of beauty.

The fourth example occurs when the husband cheats on his wife and feels shameful. The lack of mirrors in the summer houses causes the husband's shame to reflect back on himself (Shields 458). From this moment until the end of the story he no longer identifies himself in his wife, he has to look for identity within himself. The absence of mirrors creates a loss of seemingly concrete identity markers for the husband, therefore the truth is not graspable to him: "But since... [man's mirrored image] was unreal, namely, not made of stuff he could lay his hand on, he obviously felt he was faced with his soul (Elkisch 240). With the absence of mirrors and the loss of identity markers in his reflection, the husband has to look inward to understand the cultural imposition placed on him by unfaithfulness in marriage. Along with the feelings of disorientation, the husband has betrayed his wife twice, once with the affair, and once with another woman who was so dependent on mirrors and her appearance: "She was more beautiful too, though with a kind of beauty that had to be checked and affirmed continually" (Shields 457). Ventura notes that "the extramarital affair is a double betrayal, since, for one thing, the husband is not true to his wife and for another he also forswears the vow of mirrorlessness by accepting his mistress's dependency on mirrors" (213). The husband needs to find something to mirror because he has "an imminent threat of loss of self" in his marriage with the betrayal of both his wife and mirrorlessness, which is inherent in the occurrence of mirroring (Elkisch 242). The husband longs to put his head down on the pine table in the kitchen, which is a metaphorical substitute for Narcissus' mirror, where the betrayal of the affair has changed the surface of the table so that he cannot see his reflection: "The husband seems to long for a restoration of his self-image on the smooth mirror of the pine table. His mirror substitute is made of wood, and the

simplicity of wood echoes the simplicity of glass” (Ventura 213). Since there are no mirrors at the summer house and the pine table does not have a reflective surface, the husband has to find something else to mirror, and in this case, it is himself. Therefore, the absence of mirrors and reflection as an identity marker forces the husband to break out of the selfishness of being unfaithful in his marriage.

The fifth example happens at the end of the story when the narrator speaks through the husband’s vision when the husband and wife look at each other in the bedroom. The husband does not recognize his wife as they glance at each other: “...The two of them at this moment had become each other, at home behind the screen of each other’s face. It was several seconds before he was able to look away” (Shields 460). This is an instance of a loss of individual identity; the story has lost all sense of identity markers, as do the husband and wife when they are reflected in each other. Kruk further explains this loss of identity markers in the story: “Where the publicly projected self was once *other*, the private other is now *self*, located within the concentric circles of marriage bed, summer house, Big Circle Lake” (135). The summer house represents a break in narcissism in relation to the cultural impositions of relating oneself to the other, and the husband and wife look towards each other to search for identity, finding a reflection in each other. The reflection in the other creates a lack of orientation in reality from waking from sleep as well as in identity, creating a feeling of uncanny (Jentsch 8). Rahimi describes this phenomenon well: “it is that which is familiar, of the self and known to the self, yet supposed to remain hidden from the self, but has become apparent, has become visible to the self” (459). The husband and wife are mirroring each other, seeing each other as themselves, before which the husband does not recognize his wife. This sense of

uncanny can also be described using Lacan's mirror stage. Eagleton writes that the reflected image "is at once somehow part of ourselves – we *identify* with it – and yet not ourselves, something alien" (143). The husband and wife lose their sense of self when they look at each other and see something alien in the other person. According to Lacan, "the function of the mirror stage is to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality" (443). The husband and wife are attempting to find reality in the other, as they are losing their sense of identity markers: "They have learned to accommodate the otherness of the same and the sameness of the other, while mirroring each other in the pupils of their eyes" (Ventura 217). This loss of identity signals a split with the narcissism inherent in cultural impositions of the self and other.

The sixth example that signals a break from the narcissism of the couple is focalized through the husband when he talks about their self-care routines at the summer house. In the absence of mirrors, the couple have to shave and do their hair and make-up without mirrors. At the cottage, the husband is no longer meticulous about shaving: "Just try it. Shut your eyes and you'll see you can manage a decent shave without the slightest difficulty. Maybe not a perfect shave, but good enough for out at the lake" (Shields 452). Also, the wife makes do without mirrors, in the same way that her husband does: "She does her hair in the morning...by feel, brushing it out, patting it into shape.... As for lipstick, she makes do with a quick crayoning back and forth across her mouth..." (Shields 453). Without mirrors, they have lost concern for their appearance, shaving or doing their makeup "haphazardly", not needing their hair or makeup to be perfect. This lack of concern for their appearance with the lack of mirrors signals a break in narcissism. Lunbeck notes that narcissism "at its simplest is a freighted synonym for

self-love or self-absorption” (13). The couple are no longer self-absorbed with their appearance, the mirrorless cottage creates a relaxed environment for them. This break in narcissism liberates the couple from the cultural implication of beauty and narcissism as “an indulgent, sensuous, and feminized consumption” (Lunbeck 15). The lack of mirrors at the cottage forces the couple away from the cultural implications of beauty and perfection.

The seventh example takes place when the husband describes the first time they met. The two individuals remind themselves of each other: “‘You remind me of someone,’ she said the first time they met. He knew she meant that he reminded her of herself. Some twinned current flowed between them” (Shields 459). The wife finds something familiar to her, yet unfamiliar at the same time, she has found someone with which to identify: “We have only to understand the mirror stage as an *identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image...” (Lacan 442). The wife sees her image reflected in her husband and identifies with it. According to Eagleton, during Lacan’s mirror stage, “the child ‘misrecognizes’ itself in [the mirror], finds in the image a pleasing unity which it does not actually experience in its own body” (143). The wife sees herself in her husband, however she does not understand this recognition. This mirroring of each other abolishes narcissism through individuation: “From a Freudian perspective, the narcissistic state is one characterized by a lack of inner experience...the kind of experience that defines the self as an autonomous being” (Friedman 171). There is an internalization of narcissistic mirrors to produce an autonomous self, the formation of an identity capable of self-realization (Friedman 172). Although the wife recognizes

herself in her husband, and they experience other uncanny experiences throughout the story, the two characters demonstrate individuality through different thoughts and feelings in the story. This can be seen through a change in focalization between the two characters to describe their thoughts and feelings through a third-person omniscient narrator. This individual expression of feelings and thoughts liberate the couple from the cultural imposition of homogeneity and uniformity in cultural production: “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness.... Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together” (Adorno and Horkheimer 94). Therefore, the division between narcissism and individuality liberates the characters from homogenous culture.

## **5. The Presence of Mirrors and Narcissism**

As much as the absence of mirrors within the story is anti-Narcissistic, and effectively liberates the couple from cultural impositions, the presence of mirrors in the natural lake and the dialogue results in narcissism. Ventura explains:

In narrated space, mirrors have been eliminated, but their presence, which is necessarily an absence, makes itself felt through the representation of the place in discourse, which consecrates the extraordinary dimension of the log cabin by the lake as subtending the possibility of the inversion of signification (212).

The inversion of the signification of the mirror begins with Big Circle Lake. There is no specific identity marker for Big Circle Lake, which reflects the elimination of mirrors. This is ironic, however, because Big Circle Lake, being a body of water, is a natural mirror; the lake is a substitute for the mirrors in the story: “...while the couple are

represented in a state of mirrorlessness, they are made to inhabit a house next to a circular watery surface, the reflection of which is deliberately suppressed from utterance” (Ventura 208). This inescapable presence of the mirror as Big Circle Lake signifies that the couple is never far away from the narcissism caused by the cultural ideals imposed on them. At the same time that Big Circle Lake breaks the deprivation of mirrors at the summer house, the reflection of the lake cannot be prevented as it is a mirror made by nature (Girod 5). Also, when the husband and wife go to wash up in the lake, there is no mention made of the reflection of themselves they may have seen in the water.

In order to argue further that the absence of mirrors creates a break in narcissism, it is necessary to consider that the presence of mirrors involves narcissism with the characters in Carol Shields’ “Mirrors”. This is explained further by Ventura’s analysis of “Mirrors”: “The annual season of non-reflectiveness allows the simultaneous presence of selflessness and self-seeking in the psychological build-up of the characters, just as it accommodated several kinds of duplicitous mirrorings in the narrated space and the space of utterance” (209). Therefore, within the story the lack of narcissism in the “narrative space” translates to inherent narcissism in the “space of utterance”. For example, in the story, the wife reflects upon the composition of the mirror, and refers to them as magical, composed of glass and silver:

She had always found it curious that mirrors, which seemed magical in their properties, in their ability to multiply images and augment light, were composed of only two primary materials: a pane of glass pressed up against a pane of silver. Wasn’t there something more required? Was this really all there was to it?

The simplicity of glass. The preciousness of silver. Only these two elements were needed from the miracle of reflection to take place. When a mirror was broken, the glass could be replaced. When a mirror grew old, it had only to be resilvered. There was no end to a mirror. It could go on and on. It could go on forever.

Perhaps her life was not as complicated as she thought. Her concerns, her nightmares, her regrets, her suspicions—perhaps everything would eventually be repaired, healed, obliterated. Probably her husband was right: she made too much of things (Shields 458-459).

In this example the wife reflects on the composition of mirrors, which sparks a reflection on her life. Essentially, when the mirrors are present (whether physically or mentally) the wife thinks about herself and opens up to narcissistic tendencies. According to Girod, the mirror stands for self-awareness and truth. When the wife thinks about the mirror, she becomes self-aware and finds the truth in her husband's evaluation of her behavior. Lacan notes that the mirror stage leads to the formation of the I (441). Therefore, when the mirror is present in the story, the characters open themselves up to self-reflection. At the same time, when the mirrors are absent in the story, they mirror each other, signaling a collapse in narcissism between the self and other.

A second example of the presence of narcissism in the presence of mirrors is when the husband discusses his concern with the mirrors after he reflects on his son and daughter's perception of the couple living without mirrors. The husband believes that the son and daughter describe the absence of mirrors in the summer house as an eccentric or

a stabilizing act; however, he notes: “Living without mirrors is cumbersome and inconvenient, if the truth were known, and moreover, he has developed a distaste in recent years for acts of abnegation, finding something theatrical and childish about cultivated denial, something stubbornly willful and self-cherishing” (Shields 459-460). The deliberate absence of mirrors at the summer house creates an inherent narcissism, and a denial of the problems rising from cultural and societal impositions at the same time that the absence of mirrors liberates the couple from cultural impositions. “People in the house can forget who they are or at least what they look like and problems, which a mirror could reveal, are pushed away” (Girod 5). Furthermore, the asceticism and renunciation of mirrors leads to narcissism: “The psychoanalyst’s narcissism, rooted in deprivation and unmet need.... The exemplary narcissists of the consulting room were not the hedonists of the social critics’ collective imagining but, rather, closet ascetics, glorying in their independence of everyone and everything” (Lunbeck 11). The asceticism and deprivation that the husband and wife voluntarily accept is a form of narcissism, as noted when the husband calls denial self-cherishing, recognizing the narcissism within the absence of mirrors: “...the mirror finds a presence in the text through the unconscious and contradiction and denegation (Ventura 209). At the same time that the absence of mirrors at the summer house and the reflection on this absence leads back to narcissism, the choice to eliminate mirrors in summer house is inherently non-narcissistic: “Of course, for the couple no mirror was needed to show the cottage’s real beauty. It has emotional value, which no mirror in the world could show” (Girod 5). As much as the reflection on mirrors in the story signals narcissism, and the absence of mirrors may signal narcissism as well, the summer house is non-narcissistic because it

harbours an emotional connection. Considering that the presence of mirrors results in narcissistic tendencies of the characters in the stories, the absence of mirrors and the emotional connection to the summer house, where mirrors are absent, thus effectively breaks narcissistic tendencies.

## **6. Conclusion**

Overall, in Carol Shields short story “Mirrors”, the absence of mirrors creates a break in narcissism inherent in culture, which liberates the characters from cultural impositions, as shown through the loss of identity markers and the characters thoughts in the absence of mirrors. The excerpts from the text were analyzed using psychoanalysis, including Freud’s The Uncanny and Narcissism, Lacan’s mirror stage, as well as the cultural theories of Lunbeck, Friedman and Adorno and Horkheimer. When they relinquish narcissism, the husband and wife are liberated from cultural impositions of beauty, fashion, vanity, gender, marriage, the self and other, and uniformity.

It is interesting to note that in the story, the wife is always reflecting on the mirrors, and the husband always reflects on his wife, referring to the search for the self within the constraints of culture and society. Ventura summarizes the story well when she says:

...Shields has made us witness the lovers’ progress from the forswearing of mirrors as an emblem of vanity to the secret accommodation of mirrors as an emblem of truth, which reaches its final climax in the acknowledgement of the beloved’s pupil as the natural looking glass reflecting the divine essence of love (217).

In order to expand on this topic, further research can be conducted regarding “Mirrors” as an anti-Narcissus myth, as well as the imagery and metaphor of mirrors in the story. Furthermore, it would be useful to explore the connections between identity and mirrors in the story, and the progress the characters make throughout the story. As Shields writes in the first paragraph of “Mirrors”, the couple is ultimately reminded of “their better selves” when they spend their summers by the lake because the absence of mirrors interferes with narcissism and liberates them from the cultural impositions of everyday life.

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**Herstory: Gender in Flux / L'histoire au féminin : la  
vacillation du genre**

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# “A Rose for Emily”: The Dichotomy of a Rose

By Justine Schweizer

## *Abstract*

As one of the most prominent figures of Southern literature, William Faulkner is known for his highly accurate and critical depictions of the South, most notably during its transition from the plantation era to the industrial age. His work presents all aspects of the changing South and its colourful cast of characters. Perhaps none are as emblematic and ambiguous as that of “A Rose for Emily”’s eponymous character, Emily Grierson. Through his innovative use of narration and his portrayal of her, Faulkner represents the transitioning South as it moves from one era to the next, with all the crises and complexities it entails. Written in the prime of the feminist movement, “A Rose for Emily” portrays a character caught between identities: the masculine and the feminine, the past and the present, the passive and the active. Going from subject to object and back again throughout the narrative, Miss Emily Grierson is the embodiment of the rose her creator symbolically gifts her. She is the petals of the flower, supple and soft, and the thorns of the stem, harsh and unyielding.

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## 1. Introduction

“A Rose for Emily” is one of William Faulkner’s most studied works. Written in 1930, the short story follows the downfall of Miss Emily Grierson, from her early womanhood to her eventual death. Like much of Faulkner’s work, the action takes place in the fictional town of Jefferson, Mississippi during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Faulkner was clearly fascinated with the old American South and its slow decay following the Revolutionary War, to be replaced by an unfamiliar “New South” (Roberts 234). While this theme, and many other recurring aspects of Faulkner’s writing, such as the importance and use of time, can be found in “A Rose for Emily”, a more sparingly studied facet of the short story lies in the title and its relation to the eponymous character. Why does Faulkner ‘give’ a rose to Emily? And why does he associate her to that particular flower? Through a close reading of the text, a postmodern, feminist and

psychoanalytic analysis of the text and its characters, we will see that the rose, with its soft petals and sharp thorns, is in fact emblematic of Emily and defines her character throughout the story.

## **2. William Faulkner and the Confederate Woman: a tale of ambiguity**

William Faulkner (1897-1962) was born and lived most of his life in Mississippi. His life was therefore embedded in the South and he was greatly influenced by his heritage and everything it entailed. While the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) was long over by the time he was born, Faulkner was fascinated by the changes that occurred in the South between the period preceding it and the evolution in ideology and society that followed it. This is illustrated in much of his work, most of which is set in the fictional county of Yoknapatawpha. As in “A Rose for Emily”, Faulkner’s work often portrays the changing of the guard between the highly hierarchical society of the old South, based on property and status, race and slavery, and the society of the “New South” (Roberts 234), which was formed during and after the industrial revolution, and left behind ideas of aristocracy for gentrification. One hallmark of this transition is the character which has been defined as “the Confederate Woman” (233). She is an essential element in many of Faulkner’s stories as he reimagined her to embody “a figure in crisis” (234) and represent the “wreck of a society through fluid gender and race roles” (234). As Roberts defines her, “[t]he Confederate Woman comes from women taking on traditionally masculine roles but with no sacrifice of what the culture identifies as essential white femininity” (235). Faulkner uses the “Confederate Woman” (233) in stories such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom* and *The Unvanquished*. In the latter, Rosa Millard “becomes

master, wielder of ‘masculine’ ownership of children and slaves” (238) while maintaining her “ladyhood” (238). Faulkner is therefore no stranger to portraying ambiguous female characters, and this holds true for Miss Emily Grierson in “A Rose for Emily”. Throughout the short story, her character is portrayed alternately as masculine and feminine, strong and weak, young and old.

The “Confederate Woman” usually describes a female character living during the American Revolutionary War. As in *The Unvanquished*, she takes on a leading, masculine role in society during the war to compensate for the men’s departure, while retaining her feminine attributes such as piety and care. Miss Grierson’s story is clearly set after the War of Independence, as evidenced by the mention of the year “1894” (Faulkner 1), and yet Faulkner chooses to represent her as a “Confederate Woman”. While Emily does not experience the Revolutionary War, she embodies the last vestiges of the Old South. Her presence in a town undergoing gentrification and moving on from the values her family stands for bridges the gap between two worlds, the plantation era and the post-war and industrial revolution age. In addition, her father’s death, like the departure of soldiers during wartime, forces her to take charge of her own destiny. She becomes her own master and the owner of a slave and a house thereby embodying a highly masculine role. However, this new role and newfound power does not erase her femininity. She gives “lessons in china-painting” (Faulkner 6) and is seemingly courted by a “foreman named Homer Barron” (4) whom she prepares to marry. Therefore, as she combines masculine and feminine roles, Miss Emily can be considered a “Confederate Woman”.

Emily Grierson also embodies “a figure in crisis” (Roberts 234). She is shaken by the death of her father whose body she refuses to give up for several days, clinging to him in the same way she clings to antiquated ideals which have no place in the new societal order. In fact, her attachment to the body of her father and Homer Barron can be seen as a metaphor for her existential crisis. Emily lives in a time of transition, her family represents the last of the Old South and its ideals while the world around them is shifting and embracing modernity in the form of new money, paved roads and “free postal delivery” (Faulkner 7). Miss Grierson’s peculiar position in the town means she belongs neither to the past nor the present: she is tethered to the past by her family name, her house and her upbringing, while the world which she must navigate is in the present. In order to reconcile her identity, she first attempts to anchor herself in the past by clinging to her dead father’s body. However, she is forced to let him go and he is “buried” (4), thereby severing her physical link to the past. Though the “house was ... left to her” (3) as well as “The Negro” (5), neither is sufficient to tie her to the past. The house is “decay[ing]” (1) and no longer the monument it once was, while “the Negro” has no real attachment to her beyond his station. As time moves on and she grows older, Emily becomes more and more a relic in a city in evolution moving towards progress. She therefore endeavours to tie herself to this present by latching on to “Homer Barron”. One can only assume he refused to marry her and she must resort to murder in order to keep him in her “bridal” (8) chamber. Again, she keeps his body to anchor herself in the present, this time carefully avoiding suspicion so as to ensure he remains in her custody. Her efforts however, are as futile as before. Emily Grierson is too attached to the past to ever belong in the present. She refuses to let her “Negro” free because she clings to the

old ideals of the plantation era where the White own and the Black belong. In addition, as old and decrepit as her house may be, she does not leave. In this way, she remains stuck in the past, not enough to belong there, yet enough to prevent her from belonging anywhere else.

In her ambiguities and her crisis, Emily Grierson embodies the “Confederate Woman” Faulkner so often uses in his work. She represents a multi-faceted character, weak and strong, masculine and feminine. These gender roles and the power attributed to them is an integral part of the character’s ambiguities both within itself and in relation to others.

### **3. Gender roles and power plays**

“A Rose for Emily” is rife with oppositions. It seems the entire town of Jefferson is defined by these polarities which give it structure and regulate everyday life. From the black slaves owned by white proprietors to the old town being taken over by modernity, Jefferson seems to be an amalgamation of binary systems, and as many such systems do, one component dominates the other. Perhaps the most striking example of this power dichotomy is that which opposes men and women, or rather, all the men in the village to one woman, Emily Grierson.

The discourses of power discussed by postmodernists are clearly evidenced in “A Rose for Emily”. Indeed, the eponymous character is created by the narrative insofar as she is the “subject” (Butler 56) of the narrator’s discourse. She is therefore defined as “*the other*” (Butler 46) and marginalized by the townspeople who present her as “a fallen

monument” and “only a woman” (Faulkner 1). This “other-determination” (Butler 59) is made more evident by the condescending tone of certain passages, such as when “people had begun to feel sorry for her” (Faulkner 3) and “she had become humanized” (3-4). Ms. Grierson is also marginalized through the description of her house which stands as a reminder of times past in an evolving society where new roads are being built. It stands as “an eyesore among eyesores” (1), stubbornly refusing to yield to progress in much the same way Emily refuses to yield to the next generation. But in this stubborn fight, both are alienated from their surroundings and they “decay” (1) in isolation. It is perhaps fitting that “the cedar-bemused cemetery” (1) is described directly after the house; both hold corpses –which include Homer Barron and Emily – rotting away and abandoned.

Patriarchal oppression of Emily is also highly relevant in the dynamics opposing her to others. One can see this subjugation in the way she is described as having been “subordinate[d]” (Butler 45) by her father’s patriarchal figure, who had “thwarted her woman's life so many times” (Faulkner 6). As Simone de Beauvoir would say, “[h]e is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (de Beauvoir 26). Miss Emily is always under her father’s control. In her youth, she is seen as “a slender figure in white in the background” (Faulkner 3), overshadowed by her father’s “spraddled silhouette in the foreground ... clutching a horsewhip” (3). This phrasing is reminiscent of Faulkner’s description of Homer and Emily’s outings, during which Homer has “reins and whip in a yellow glove” (6), indicating that Homer is just as overbearing and controlling as Mr. Grierson had been. The latter’s domineering figure casts its shadow over Miss Emily until her death. During her funeral, “the crayon face of her father mus[es] profoundly above the bier” (7). In fact, we learn throughout the story that her father’s hold on Emily

was so strong that he forbade her from marrying. He “thwart[s] her woman’s life” (6) repeatedly and constantly oppresses Miss Grierson.

The patriarchy’s oppression of Emily is also visible in her interactions with the city council. While the previous mayor – Colonel Sartoris – had dispensed her from paying taxes, the new generation in power disagrees with the edict and a delegation of councilmen is sent to Miss Grierson’s house in order to persuade her to pay her dues to the town when letters remain unanswered. By showing up in numbers, the councilmen hope to intimidate and subdue Emily, something they had failed to do through their letters and calls. The evident lack of respect shown by the new generation of councilmen towards their predecessors, and by extension Emily, exposes their oppressive standpoint. Their relative position of power as members of the city council affords them fairly easy means of pressuring Emily into paying taxes, even though they must be aware of her dire financial situation.

However, Miss Emily “vanquishe[s] them, horse and foot” (2) by referring them to the late Colonel Sartoris who she knows is dead. She stands firm in her resolve and recognizes the threat they pose on her identity. Their lack of respect for her position as a Lady is evidenced by their will to revoke her tax “arrangement” (1) and she is quick to put them in their place. Emily does not receive the envoys of the council as a good hostess but rather like a war general. “She d[oes] not ask them to sit” (2) and stays standing herself, indicating a clear confrontation between two parties. This refusal to sit demonstrates a masculine stance on Emily’s part, as does the scene that follows. Emily is “dry and cold” (2) and rattles her visitors so that they are left “stumbling” (2). Her answers are short and clipped and leave no room for argument. She questions the

sheriff's status, recognizing no authority greater than the late Colonel Sartoris' and quickly dismisses the men. To add insult to injury, she asks "Tobe" (2) to "see [the] gentlemen out" (2). During the entire visit, Miss Grierson holds the dominant, masculine role. She is the mistress and owner of the house and therefore decides whether or not to receive the councilmen and for how long. In addition, she stays standing during the confrontation, which indicates strength and resolve on her part. Finally, she leads the dialogue and goes so far as to give her guests orders ("See Colonel Sartoris" (2)) before dismissing them completely. While the council may have thought that brute force would bend Emily Grierson to their will, the roles are reversed and they find themselves at her mercy.

Through her life, Emily Grierson is surrounded by so many oppressive and commanding figures that she becomes alienated from society entirely, "people hardly saw her at all" (Faulkner 2). This alienation from her kinfolk is so pronounced that she finds herself more comfortable with the dead and her aging servant than the living. While she is very rarely seen in public, she finds solace in the company of "the Negro" (1) Tobe and the corpse of Homer Barron which she keeps until her own death. We are even led to believe that she slept next to him every night from the time of his death, as evidenced by the "long strand of iron-grey hair" (8) found on the pillow next to him.

While it is easy to presume that Miss Grierson is nothing more than a poor, old woman, dominated by men and ensconced in the values of the past, she is also depicted as a symbol of feminine resistance. This defiance is visible multiple times throughout the short story. For instance, during her encounter with the pharmacist, she does not hesitate to interrupt the latter's speech on several occasions. In addition, her speech is direct and

devoid of the frivolity usually associated with female speech; Emily knows what she wants and clearly indicates that she will not leave without it when she says “I want some poison” (Faulkner 5) or “I want arsenic” (5). Finally, when the pharmacist attempts to explain that he needs to know what she intends to use the poison for, “Miss Emily just stare[s] at him ... until he look[s] away” (5). In doing so, she actively takes on a masculine and dominant role and reclaims her independence of patriarchal rule (Kirchdorfer). In this instance, she confronts and subdues her adversary until he complies with her. The scene plays out very much like a Western duel. However, the Southern version evidently seems to involve less gunfire and more strength of will.

She also vanquishes patriarchy by outliving her father and Homer, as well as most of the original council. This particular act of rebellion may not seem crucial, however, it allows Emily to free herself from her father’s oppressive and physically abusive presence – the old man did wield a “whip” (Faulkner 6) after all – and Homer’s unfortunate preference for men. By outliving them and keeping their bodies, Emily reverses the roles of oppressor and oppressed, and becomes the subject rather than the object, in the perverse relationships she keeps with the two men’s corpses. She is now the only active participant in their interactions and therefore retrieves the power they had taken from her by not allowing her to marry, in the case of her father, and allowing her to fall for an unattainable man who “liked men” (Faulkner 5), in Homer’s case. Finally, and maybe Emily’s most flagrant act of rebellion lies in her refusal to pay her taxes and her swift response to the councilmen’s attempt to make her do so. Miss Grierson’s lack of response to the council’s original letter and call clearly displays her lack of respect for the town’s new patriarchal generation.

Through these events, Miss Emily is characterized “not primarily as a psychically damaged and compulsively driven woman, but as one who methodically and deliberately challenges virtually all the social, historical, sexual, and ideological boundaries within which she lives” (Kartiganer 481). While oppressed, she takes on a feminine role; however, her ability to turn situations in her favor and gain the upper hand allows her to break out of the passive, feminine role thrust upon her by society in order to don a masculine and powerful role.

#### **4. Gossip and reliability**

Another, highly oppressive power present in “A Rose for Emily” lies directly in the text. It is the narrator’s voice. While it is difficult to determine the nature of the narrator, it seems clear that he has little respect for Miss Emily Grierson. He refers to her as a “fallen monument” (Faulkner 1) and “a duty” (1). In addition, his physical description of Emily is as unflattering as that of her house. While the latter is “an eyesore among eyesores” (1), Miss Grierson is described as “a small, fat woman in black” (2) who “looked bloated” (2). In fact, he compares her to a corpse, “a body long submerged in motionless water” (2). In doing so, the narrator displays his own oppression of Emily. However, several inconsistencies in the narration and point of view seem to indicate its unreliability.

The narrator seems to embody the voice of ‘the town’. Much of the story is recounted from the point of view of “we” (1), which places the narrator within a group of people sharing an opinion. Their view of Miss Emily is very poor and highly speculative. This group of individuals on behalf of whom the narrator claims to speak gossips over

any and every event involving Miss Grierson. Her purchase of arsenic is immediately followed by their expectation that “She will kill herself” (5) while her frequent outings with Homer Barron led to the speculation that “She w[ould] marry him” (5). When the latter disappeared, this unnamed posy was quick to pity Emily. Like a group of bored housewives, they “watch developments” (6), analyse behaviour and pass judgement without any direct knowledge of Miss Emily. They show pity, disappointment and anticipation as they watch Emily’s life unfold before their eyes. Their gaze gives them power over the object of their attention. Miss Emily’s life is depicted like a movie in which she plays the title role. She becomes a prop in a greater production meant to entertain others.

On the other hand, some of the story is told from a third person omniscient point of view which clashes with the rest of the text. Such is the case for the passages depicting Miss Grierson’s interview with the councilmen and her visit to the “druggist” (5). This change in narration is useful to the text as it provides the reader with knowledge he may not acquire otherwise, however, this supposes that the men present in both instances (the councilmen and the druggist) are not part of the greater “we” (1) usually employed by the narrator. This seems to indicate that the general “we” often used for narration does not include men, which is realistic considering the resemblance of that voice to “gossip” (Klein 229). In fact, Klein argues that Faulkner was attempting in this way to recreate the voice of “society columnists” (231). The change in narrative stance also serves a second purpose. It allows the reader to creep into the private life of Miss Emily Grierson more completely. This is yet another way in which the narrator oppresses her. His pervasive

intrusion into her home and private affairs further presents her as an object which the reader views through an omniscient looking glass.

Finally, Faulkner uses a third narrative voice, that of the third person limited “they” (1). This voice allows the narrator to distance himself from the narration by describing the actions and opinions of others. However, these others are no more defined than the previously described “we”. “They” seem to represent the new generation of Jeffersonians, including the councilmen looking to revoke Emily’s tax exemption. These individuals seem even more condescending towards Miss Emily than their ancestors. They “pity Miss Emily” (3) and label her “a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people” (6). While there does not seem to be any reason for this narrative point of view, it provides the narrator with a second group to corroborate the opinion of “we”, thereby strengthening and verifying the first group’s observations and claims. Providing two different points of view with congruent judgements and opinions seems to reinforce the narrator’s reliability and fool the reader into believing what he is told. By presenting Miss Grierson as a subject and not giving her a voice, the narrator allows the reader to identify with him and the group he represents, further oppressing her. However, the few direct quotations provided from Miss Emily contradict this carefully constructed idea of a subservient subject.

When directly presented, Emily Grierson’s dialogue indicates a strong woman taking charge and giving orders inconsistent with the opinions provided by the narrator. During her meeting with the councilmen, Emily interrupts her guests twice, “We must go by the--” (2) and “But, Miss Emily--” (2). She thereby asserts her superiority. In addition, she questions her visitors’ authority and gives them orders, dismissing them with an

exclamation “Tobe! ... Show these gentlemen out” (2). The same pattern is repeated when Miss Emily encounters the druggist. She interrupts him on three occasions. In addition, though she is the one in need of a service, she does not ask for poison and instead demands it, “I want some poison” (5). Her only question concerns the quality of the product she is requesting “Is that a good one” (5) and not the service itself. Whereas she could easily have asked for poison more courteously (Could you give me some poison? For example), such a question would necessarily have placed the druggist as the subject of the verb and given him power over the outcome of the discussion. By demanding a product, Miss Emily reverses the roles and places herself as the subject of the verb, “I want” (5). In doing so, she consciously takes on a masculine, dominating role and places herself in a position of superiority.

In his analysis, Abdurrahman argues that each narrative voice represents a specific group of people in the short story (Abdurrahman 225). He draws parallels between the narrator’s description of Miss Emily in each act and her relationship with the town, from her early days to her “defeat ... as a monument” (225). While Miss Emily’s relationship to the townspeople shifts through time, the changes in narrative voice do not coincide with the various acts of the short story. Act I contains both third person limited and omniscient passages while act II combines all three narrative voices. This argument is therefore insufficient to explain the use of all these points of view. However, each one provides a novel way in which Emily Grierson’s character can be subjugated by others and Faulkner may have used the various voices to that effect, while leaving direct dialogue so as to allow the reader to question the narrator’s reliability. While the narrator’s motive may be unknown throughout the story, other relationships can be

analysed more productively through psychoanalysis such as those Emily develops with Homer Barron and her father.

## **5. Emily and her men: fixation or freedom?**

It is obvious from Emily's obsessive guarding of her father's and Homer's bodies that her relationship to men is warped. This may be explained psychoanalytically through an analysis of her early life with her father. As Emily's mother is never mentioned within the text, it is safe to assume she is either dead or gone and has been since Emily was quite young. The lack of a motherly influence is significant because it indicates that the young Miss Grierson may suffer from an unresolved "Oedipus complex" (Eagleton 134). As summarized by Eagleton, an Oedipus complex occurs in young girls when they are unable to assume their "feminine gender role" (135), a step which naturally occurs once they abandon the "doomed" (135) project of "seducing [their] father" (135) and "effect an identification" (135) with their mother. In Miss Emily's case, this identification is impossible because of an absent mother and so nothing opposes her "incestuous" (134) desire for her father. This fixation with her father explains why she remains for so long under his control and seemingly doesn't oppose his "thwart[ing] of her woman's life" (Faulkner 6) and his driving away of "all the young men" (4). The incestuous desires stemming from her unresolved Oedipus complex also explain her refusal to acknowledge her father's death and give his body up for burial (4).

Once she finds herself freed from her father's presence, Miss Emily is described as reborn, "her hair [is] cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels" (4). This change can be interpreted in various ways; on the one hand, her

father's death can be seen as Emily's liberation from domineering, masculine influences. Released from her Oedipus complex, Emily finds herself rejuvenated and cleansed from the impure desires that plagued her during her father's lifetime. In this scenario, Emily's issues are resolved and she is able to pursue the "woman's life" (6) her father had robbed her of. However, Miss Grierson behaves with Homer even more neurotically than she did with her father, suggesting that her issues are far from resolved. This leads to a different interpretation of Emily's rejuvenated appearance following her father's death. It is possible that this regression to girlhood is symbolic of her search for a new father figure to take the place of the old one. Now returned to her childhood, Miss Emily latches on to Homer as a surrogate father. When he refuses to marry her, she is faced with the possibility of being orphaned a second time and chooses to murder him instead of letting him go in order to control the fate of his physical presence.

Through this analysis, Miss Emily is portrayed as a victim of her own circumstances. Her Oedipus complex is forced upon her by an absent mother and she is compelled to latch on to a father figure in order to satisfy her desires. However, Emily also finds a way to liberate herself from the hold her psyche has over her by murdering Homer and taking control of her condition. Again, her portrayal is ambiguous because it depicts her at once as both a victim and a victor.

## **6. A Rose for a Rose**

While reading "A Rose for Emily", one therefore comes to realise that Emily is a rose. Seen as delicate and fragile, pitied by the townspeople for her antiquated ideals and her steadfast adhesion to old principles, and left to the mercy of their gossip much like a

rose to the weather, she is nonetheless a symbol of resistance. Emily resists the patriarchy's attack on her by refusing to pay her taxes and standing up to male figures. She also resists time by outliving her main oppressor, her father. Emily has her thorns and she uses them to stand up to the town's patriarchal society, while never losing her composure and keeping the grace of the rose the author gifted her.

While others have likened the rose to "secrecy: the confidential relationship between the author and his character" (Getty 232) or as implying "that Miss Emily deserves a rose for having attempted ... to triumph over time and place in her quest for love." (Going), these analyses do not coincide with the recurring rose seen in the story. Getty's exploration fails to account for the comparison seen throughout the story, likening Emily herself to a rose, such as in the subtle description of what became Homer Barron's death chamber: "upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose shaded lights" (Faulkner 8). As for Going, his explanation is invalid insofar as Emily never did triumph "in her quest for love" (Going).

## **7. Conclusion**

It is probably fair to assume that Faulkner was keenly aware of his depiction of gender struggles as he wrote "A Rose for Emily". The short story was written in 1930, just as the first wave of feminist movements rocked through the United States and right after the right of vote was granted in the country. It is therefore likely that each element, including his choice of title and specific flower, were thought out in this very context of rising feminism. The symbolic nature of the rose as an instrument of love should not be overlooked. It may represent Faulkner's attempt to finally reconcile Emily with the love

she was never given during her life. However, its well-known dichotomy of petals and thorns seems more likely to represent Emily herself than a fictional love. Her constant search for her own identity in a changing world unconcerned with her happiness leads her to take on conflicting roles in society, she is in turn placed on a pedestal and denigrated by her neighbours, powerful and powerless, much like a rose can be soft and pliant or sharp and prickly in turn.

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# Textual Quilting and Subversive Re(-)collection: War & Feminine Discourse in Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*

By Matthew Mucha

## *Abstract*

In her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Svetlana Alexievich presents a new way of writing; one which stands in contrast to previous works of war literature by narrating from beyond the confines of censorship and dominant discourse. The writer does not exercise full “authorship” over the story she tells; instead, she shares this role by piecing together interviews from women who had formerly served as soldiers in the Soviet army in order to create a larger narrative about the Second World War. One might describe Alexievich’s work as a kind “textual quilting”; she harvests individual first-hand accounts of war and then weaves them together in order to depict larger collective histories. This work highlights the characteristics which differentiate Alexievich’s work from traditional Soviet War Literature, thereby allowing for its classification as another distinct literary genre.

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## 1. Introduction

In the words of the Swedish Academy, Svetlana Alexievich was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015 “for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time” (“The Nobel Prize in Literature 2015 - Press Release”). Indeed, her works have been hailed as a “new genre”; one that narrates collective memory with an indulgent sincerity that is lacking in previous works of Soviet war literature. This is due in large part to the text’s composition; in all five of her books (*The Unwomanly Face of War*, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, *The Last Witnesses: The Book of Unchildlike Stories*, and *Second-hand Time*), Alexievich tells her tale by piecing together selections from interviews she conducted herself, with the intent of presenting a group testimony of

certain key events in Soviet and Post-Soviet history. If most writers work with the written word as their smallest narrative unit in order to create a textual portrayal, Alexievich works with individual anecdotes and stitches them together in order to do the same, but on a grander scale. One might say that Alexievich engages in a form of “textual quilting”, incorporating as many voices into her narrative as possible in order to present complete, unaltered truths. As Alexievich words it in her Nobel Prize lecture, “In my books these people tell their own, little histories, and big history is told along the way” (“Nobel Lecture by Svetlana Alexievich”). Since Alexievich’s writing has not been filtered through dominant literary conventions, it has maintained several defining features which otherwise would have been cast to the wayside.

In the book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich creates a work of war literature which stands in stark contrast to its predecessors. The imposition of Socialist Realism as genre by the Communist Party converted artistic expression into a medium for propaganda. As such, Soviet war literature, by nature, presented a “constructed” reality in which the atrocity of war was outshone by the heroism of Red Army soldiers, and the strong leadership of the Communist Party. The genre was male-dominated in sense of authorship and content, with few female writers composing war literature, and virtually no writers of either gender writing about female soldiers. Hence, by detailing the formula by which Soviet war literature was written (as well as its intended functions), the ways in which Alexievich’s narration are distinct from its predecessors become clear. Next, it becomes necessary to discuss the book within the context of feminist theory; not with the purpose of attributing these differences to gender per se, but rather to underline its

subversive qualities. Once these tasks have been accomplished, it becomes possible to attempt a classification of her genre; delineating its stylistic form and ideology.

## **2. Soviet War Literature: Literary Paternalism and Filtered Realism**

In the case of her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, an important question presents itself: how does this book compare against previous literary works from the Soviet Union which depict the nation's involvement in war? In order to appreciate Alexievich's contribution, one must first understand how the Great War was portrayed in literature previously. As such, it is crucial to consider her work against the backdrop of two genres: the first being "Soviet War Literature," and the second being "Socialist Realism". In his article "The Great Fatherland War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Literature", Frank Ellis states that most Soviet war literature depicts two wars. He states:

The first war began on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1941 when the German Army invaded the Soviet Union...this war ended on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1945. Strictly speaking, the second war began as soon as Lenin introduced Soviet censorship, though for the study of war literature we might take its first shots to have been fired in 1941. It entered its terminal phase with Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*, which led to the formal abolition of censorship on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1990, ending, finally, in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. (612)

Similarly, as pointed out by Ernest J. Simmons in his book *Through the Looking Glass of Soviet Literature*, when discussing texts that focus on World War II, a distinction must be made between literature written during the war, and war-themed works written after

the war (24). Therefore, one must delineate textual features according to their respective time periods. One notable characteristic specific to the Soviet war literature which stood in contrast to Russian writers of previous eras was that it presented the image of the foe (the German Nazi) with a pronounced sense of hatred. In another article entitled, "Soviet War Literature", Simmons makes reference to the volume *The Great Fatherland War (Velikaya otechestvennaya voina)*, remarking that "the dominant note that runs through nearly all the material is one of fierce, unmitigated hatred for the enemy", due to the brutality exerted on the Soviet people by the Nazis, as well as the extensive damage done by the German soldiers to Soviet buildings and property (253-254) Simmons writes that another typical aspect of the genre was that, much like Alexievich's work, it was composed of "straight eyewitness accounts of actual fighting, or short stories based on real incidents of the war" (253). He goes on to cite an example from Sholokhov's short story "Hate", in which the story's protagonist, a Red Army officer named Lieutenant Gerasimov, recalls his experiences during the war in first-person narrative. In Simmons' chosen selection from the story, Gerasimov describes the discovery of a dead body; it had belonged to an eleven-year-old girl who was raped and killed by German soldiers.

We covered the body with a cape and stood a minute or two by it without speaking. Then the men went away just as silently. But I lingered on, whispering over and over, I remember, in a sort of daze: "Barkov, Polovinkin. Physical Geography, reader for higher grade schools." It was the title of one of the books lying there in the grass. A book I knew, because my own little girl was in the fifth form. (qtd. by Simmons, 254)

It is clear that Sholokhov's text resembles Alexievich's in terms of its first person narrative, as well as its candid description of a horrific scene from the war. However, although presented as a first-hand account, it differs in that the story is a work of fiction, unlike the assembly of first-hand accounts collected through interviews by Alexievich. Despite this, one cannot deny their narrative similarity. Consequently, wartime poetry also possessed certain features which bore common themes with the *The Unwomanly Face of War*. According to Simmons, the Red Army soldiers that commonly appear in war poetry are not depicted as eager fighters, but rather as men eager to finish their duties on the frontlines and return to their jobs on the farm, in factories or in offices. He says: "They hate war, as Russians have always hated it. And with their strong desire to live and return is coupled a longing that what they have loved...may be waiting for them, perhaps to help them forget the horror of what they have been through" (257). Such representations of Red Army soldiers disappear in war literature after the end of World War II, when writers were once again subjugated to the terms of the Soviet government-endorsed genre, Socialist Realism.

As a genre, Socialist Realism emerged in Russia with the rise of the proletariat in the mid-1890s, and became the official genre sponsored by the Communist Party at the 1934 Congress of Writers (James 87). Simmons noted that from this point, an author would be expected "to present reality not as he sees it but as he understands it; and he is expected to understand it in terms of *partiinost'*, that is, the way the Party understands it" (*Russian Fiction and Soviet Ideology*, 3). After the end of the war in 1946, the Central Committee on literature discerned that literary portrayals of war should contain a pronounced anti-Western sentiment, as well as a glorification of Communist leadership in battle. As a

result, writers were compelled to adhere to Party policy in this regard, and write narratives which sung the praises of the Red Army and Communist wartime leadership.

(24)

In his article “The Great Fatherland War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Literature”, Frank Ellis elaborates on the Party’s influence in literature, stating that due to the censorship of the period, Soviet War Literature was written in a style that adhered to Marxist-Leninist sensibilities. Ellis explains: “The desired themes were: mass heroism; unflinching resistance; the total evil of the Nazis (or fascists, as Soviet propaganda dubbed them); the monolithic unity of party and people; Allied timidity and the extent to which the Western Allies could be trusted; war of liberation; and Stalin” (613). Since the Party’s focus was concentrated on the war effort between 1941-1945, war-themed literature written during this period was somewhat freer from the ideological constraints of Socialist Realism; conversely, post-war literature was expected to adhere to Party-endorsed themes with more vigilance. This is manifest in the Communist Party’s treatment of certain literary works before and after the end of World War II. One example which reflects changing Soviet literary sensibilities is Aleksandr Fadeev’s *The Young Guard* (1945), a story about young communist members of underground resistance in the Ukrainian town of Krasnodon. Due to its idealized portrayal of the young communists and appropriate demonization of the German enemy, the book initially won the Stalin prize in 1946; however, the Communist Party later decided that the book had inadequately credited them for their leadership role in the resistance movement. The book was revised accordingly and re-released in 1951 (Terras 589). Vasily Grossman is another example of a writer subject to the changeable favour of the Communist Party. His

novel *In a Good Cause* was initially met with positive reviews, but later on its second half was deemed ideologically problematic, which delayed its appearance until after Stalin's death in 1954 following considerable ideological modification. (589) Its sequel entitled *Life and Fate*, which apart from the progression of war on both Soviet and German sides also included items such as life in concentration camps and a Soviet gulag, as well as frank discussion of Soviet anti-Semitism, was censored by Soviet editors for its negative depiction of Soviet society under Stalin (589). These two examples typify the experience of the Soviet writer during the post-war period up until the 1980's, demonstrating the extent to which war literature was a creation of state and not writer. At the same time, Grossman's later works and similar ones by other authors would eventually emerge, challenging artificial grand narratives. What's more, although the genre of war literature was male-dominated (both at the level of author and text), there were female writers like Vera Panova, whose war novel *Fellow Travelers* (published in English under the title *The Train*) won her a Stalin Prize in 1947. Interestingly, the description of this novel in the book *A History of Russian Literature* suggests a similar shift of narrative focus to Alexievich. The book states:

It differs from the routine Soviet war novel in that it is concerned not with battle heroics but with the private lives and personal problems of the soldiers on the train...The private life of ordinary Soviet citizens seen from the inside of their minds remained Panova's subject in the works that followed. (591)

Indeed, Alexievich herself might attribute this characteristic to the fact that Panova, like herself, narrates from a feminine perspective. In the Preface of *The Unwomanly Face*

*of War*, she summarizes the ways in which women's narrations of war differ. She explains:

Women's stories are different and about different things. "Women's" war has its own colors, its own smells, and its own range of feelings. Its own words. There are no heroes and incredible feats, there are simply people who are busy doing inhumanly human things. (xvi)

Interestingly, this idea of gender distinction proposed by Alexievich is not without a historical precedent. In fact, this concept existed in Russia until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century under another form of oral literature: narrative poetry. Although male and female genres both emerged from the same ancestor (the funeral lament), eventually women would sing laments (in Russian: *plachi*, *prichitaniia*, *prichity*), whereas men would sing string-accompanied epics (*byliny*). Both are forms of poetic narrative which are sung, possess nearly identical prosodic features, and contain tragic elements; however, laments frequently talk about the lives of the deceased, whereas the epic is a narrative about armed battle. (Kononenko 18-21) These characteristics could equally be used to justify a distinction between male and female accounts of war. However, the existence of such similarities is more indicative of perpetuated gender-based discourse, and at present offers little in the way of placing Alexievich's work within a historical vein of Russian feminine literature.

Also, to simply attribute these differences to the fact that the book is female-centered would be overly cursory. What's more, it would be more beneficial to assess how these differences destabilize discourse surrounding female gender roles, and expose

aspects of war which are lost when filtered through dominant political ideology by self- or externally imposed censorship.

### **3. War Shows Its “Unwomanly” Face: Subversive Feminist Literature**

In her essay “‘Cement’ and ‘How the Steel Was Tempered,’” Thea Margaret Durfee analyzes the newly established Communist government’s views on gender roles following the Bolshevik Revolution, and how these views are reflected in the female protagonists in the two novels are mentioned in the title of her article. She says: “Leaders of the new government looked forward to a new equality for women in the workplace, home, and community. They envisioned a new Soviet woman, liberated from the oppressive structures of bourgeois life, who would become a fully contributing member in the political, economic, and social reconstruction of society” (89). The creation of the *Zhenotdel* (or Women’s Section) of the Party Secretariat in 1919 was to oversee this vision, and encourage Russian women to participate in the Soviet revolution; this was not only to help build a new Soviet nation, but also to overthrow the patriarchal structures that oppressed women (89). One might argue that it was the success of these early efforts that saw the female protagonists in *The Unwomanly Face of War* decide to enlist in the army and make their way to the Front to fight alongside their male counterparts. Despite this, Durfee remarks that the women portrayed in “Cement” and “How the Steel Was Tempered” possessed character traits which reflected that they were a product of the new ideological wave which accorded them “domestic liberties”, but at the same time were still contextualized within traditional gender roles, such as motherhood. Hence, the end result is what Durfee calls “an uneasy resolution of conflicting qualities” (101).

In fact, Alexievich's female protagonists also speak of their individual struggles with this conundrum: the dilemma over how to fulfill their roles as soldiers in spite of their desire to be feminine. The difference, however, is that while "Cement" and "How the Steel Was Tempered" are works of fiction with conjured female characters that represented a Soviet female ideal, *The Unwomanly Face of War* contained images of real women whose voices would have previously gone unheard beyond the defined boundaries of socialist reality; one, consequently, in which female soldiers did not exist. Scholar Louise E. Luke points out that Dasha, the female protagonist in "Cement", redefines her life along the principle that "woman's primary function is economic production and that wifhood and motherhood are accessory to that function" (Luke 39). If one accepts this statement as a loose definition of the Soviet woman's societal roles, then one can deduce that "soldier" would fall into an inconvenient grey area from the perspective of propaganda.

In this regard, the choice to document the female perspective in the form of an oral history is inherently subversive. In the case of *The Unwomanly Face of War*, this subversion not only occurs at the level of political ideology, but also at the level of gender discourse. (Indeed, one will notice that the book's preface documents the process by which Alexievich maneuvers around both of these structures.)

In her "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", Elaine Showalter presents two diagrams, each representing a model of female culture; the first represents the Victorian model, in which the dominant male and subordinate female cultural circles are separate; the second, proposed by Edwin Ardener, depicts intersecting male and female circles that share an overlapped area within which male culture is "dominant", and female culture is

“muted”. There is also a part of the female circle that does not overlap with the male one, which Ardener labels as a “wild” space. Showalter declares that this space “must be the address of genuinely women-centered criticism, theory and art, whose shared project is to bring into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness, to make the visible invisible, to make the silent speak”, and from which, according to other feminist critics, “a woman can write her way out of the ‘cramped confines of patriarchal space’” (31). Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that Alexievich navigates the second model, first by acknowledging and operating through dominant (male) discourse, then forging a similar textual apparatus for herself.

The first part of the book, entitled “From a Conversation With a Historian” details a conversation with an unnamed academic about the history of women in warfare. After two pages, she immediately follows with excerpts from her own journal, in which she not only documents her trains of thought regarding the writing of her book, but also her experiences collecting information from her interviewees. She entitles this part “A Human Being is Greater Than War.” The two titles comprise the book’s Preface, and are the only two titles that are not quotations selected from Alexievich’s interviews. She begins by taking possession of the task at hand: writing a book about war. She states:

I am writing a book about war...I, who never liked to read military books, although in my childhood and youth this was the favorite reading of everybody. Of all my peers. And this is not surprising – we were the children of Victory. The children of the victors...we didn’t know a world without war; the world of war was the only one familiar to us, and the people of war were the only people we knew. (xiii-xiv)

In this quote, she speaks in terms typical of Soviet ideological discourse, referring to the “Victory” (against the Germans), and acknowledging the extent to which war colored their everyday existence. She explains that in her village, women would be the ones from which she would hear about war (not men), and that half the books at the nearby library were about war (xiv). Alexievich reported that prior to her project, all the books she read about war were written by men about men. Whenever she revealed that she was writing about women’s experiences in the war, she was constantly met with male bias about the value and reliability of their accounts. She reports that many of the women even admitted to being coached by their husbands on how to talk about their memories, while others responded to her requests for an interview by saying that she needn’t focus on the “small details” (which Alexievich deemed a vital part of the female oral history) and to instead focus on the “great Victory” ever-present in dominant (male) political discourse (xxv). She gradually begins to include excerpts from interviewees’ oral and written accounts in order to transition to the main section of the book, which is nearly entirely made up of names, occupations, and pieces of personal stories, peppered with the occasional commentary from the author. She also includes conversations with the censor, who attempts to dissuade her, and criticizes her for not honoring the grandeur of the Victory, and instead devaluing the soldiers’ heroism by focusing on the obscenities of war. These conversations are a textual depiction of how female discourse creates friction with its male counterpart. Ultimately, she later includes items that were originally censored, as well as parts that she herself intended to leave out.

The remaining sections of the book are quoted directly from the interviews, symbolically giving nearly complete agency to the female soldiers themselves.

Alexievich usually introduces each chapter with a brief introduction of her encounter with the female soldiers as she encounters them in the present (and occasionally place her reflections at the end as well). She then proceeds to document their memories from the past. Dialogue in the present is italicized, and recollections from the past are left in regular print. Also, unless otherwise requested, the names and occupations appear above the stories so as to give each soldier agency in presenting their individual and collective histories. It is this type of polyphonic writing to which the Nobel Prize community referred to when awarding Alexievich with the prize.

A few recurring themes in the book as they pertain to war are: Encounters with Death, War as the Great Equalizer, Life During War, and Humanity. Death is present in different forms throughout the narrative, as soldiers refer to the loss of their comrades, their family members, people they met in passing, or even that of German soldiers. At times, they are the ones that are doing the killing. What makes it distinct from the death in male Soviet War Literature, which is depicted as an honourable sacrifice, these women speak of death as something tragic, revealing its effect on them mentally and emotionally. One army nurse, Anna Ivanivna Belyai, shares one recollection: “The battle ended during the night. In the morning fresh snow fell. Under it the dead...Many had their arms raised up...toward the sky...You ask me: what is happiness? I answer...To suddenly find a living man among the dead... (60)

The theme of “War as the Great Equalizer” is most explicit in the ways that the book depicts the topic of gender. In entering the male world of war, many of the women reveal the ways in which they would “suppress” their femininity, while others would reveal the ways in which they would allow it to emerge. Universally, they would all concur how

their female colleagues would successfully fulfill their roles as soldiers regardless of perceived gender differences and gender prejudice from their male counterparts. Air Force Captain Kalvdia Ivanovna Terekhova reveals: “We flew fighters. The altitude was terrible strain on a woman’s whole body...But our girls shot down aces, and what aces! You know, when we walked by, men looked at us with astonishment: ‘they’re women pilots.’ They admired us...” (56).

Another way this theme presents itself is through interactions with Germans. Although many expressed hatred towards the Germans, many expressed humane sympathy for some of them once they interacted with them, as seen in one anonymous account:

Two wounded men lay in my ward...A German and our badly burned tank driver. I come to look at them: “How do you feel?” “I’m all right,” our tank driver replies, “but he’s in a bad way.” “This fascist...” “No, I don’t know, but he’s in a bad way.” They were no longer enemies, but people, simply two wounded men lying next to each other. Something human arose between them. I observed more than once how quickly it happened... (Alexievich 127).

Much of what is recollected by these women are the details of everyday life, with war existing as a backdrop. This at times included love stories which resulted in marriage, loss and separation, or unrequited love. Another soldier, Sofya Krigel, recalls:

As we were leaving for the front, each of us gave an oath: there will be no romances there...At the front, love was forbidden. If the superiors found out about it, one of the couple as a rule was transferred to another unit. They were

simply separated. We cherished our love and kept it secret. We didn't keep our childish oaths... We loved... I think that if I hadn't fallen in love at the war, I wouldn't have survived. Love saved us. It saved me... (Alexievich 233).

One might say that these women's stories inserted the element of humanity, which in turn sheds doubt on the legitimacy of a force which can destroy life to such an extent. In short, female soldiers' narratives did more than simply offer stories which glorified the country's great Victory or incite awe or inspiration; they offer a complete portrait of a life lived among the atrocities of war, and the hope for a utopia that extended beyond Soviet borders. Quoting soldier Olga Vasilyevna, Alexievich writes:

We all imagined that after the war, after such oceans of tears, there would be a wonderful life. Beautiful. After the Victory... after that day... We imagined that all people would be very kind, would only love each other. They would all become brothers and sisters. How we waited for that day... (157).

Since these women are not bound by the same conventions that men were raised and groomed under, their stories are unadulterated, truthful, and emotional. The juxtaposition and layering of these stories contributes to an overarching female discourse which runs parallel to and simultaneously supplements thin male war narratives which underemphasize or omit certain details that are present in female versions of events. For this reason, a subversion of dominant discourse (male, Soviet, or otherwise) takes place with each account. This realization leads to one final issue; that of nomenclature.

#### **4. Classifying Alexievich: Testimonial Literature? Or Literary Reportage?**

Alexievich being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature marks a first for the literary genre in which she creates. The question is: how does one best classify this genre? Scholar Sonu Saini offers one possible classification in his article “Revisiting the World of 'Chernobyl' After the Nuclear Disaster Through 'Testimonials': An Analysis of "The Voices From Chernobyl: A Chronicle of the Future" by labelling it as testimonial literature. Citing scholar George Yudice, Saini makes this claim due to its use of first-hand accounts from people who witnessed war first-hand, usually taking the form of an oral history. In his article “Testimonio and Postmodernism”, Yudice further elaborates on the characteristics of the genre: “Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history” (Yudice 17).

Although Alexievich’s works include oral, first-hand narratives to bring to light the horrors of war, it may not be appropriate to classify *The Unwomanly Face of War* specifically as testimonial literature, since the events being depicted are no longer occurring in the present, and are instead invoked by memory. Also, since Alexievich is technically the author of the book, and it is she who harvests the interviewees’ stories rather than the interviewees presenting their stories directly on their own through a sense of “urgency”, then it is arguable whether or not this type of classification would be too farfetched.

A second possibility is offered by John C. Hartsock in his book *Literary Journalism Across the Globe*. The first chapter is dedicated to the topic of “literary reportage”, which

he aims to distinguish as a genre from “literary journalism.” He states that literary journalism is a narrative work which engages with what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as “the inconclusive present”, and hence abstains from offering the reader closure in the form of political or ideological critique. (Hartsock 19) On the other hand, he points out that literary reportage may do the same, or else it may comment on a “distanced image of the past” that is complete, and thus elicit a particular response from the reader, giving it a characteristic “elasticity” (22). Thus, he asserts that Svetlana Alexievich’s style of writing would be classified under the latter. As an oral history of World War II transcribed in the written word, *The Unwomanly Face of War* is a narrative quilt composed of verbal accounts obtained by Alexievich through interviews with female former Soviet soldiers over a period of several years in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Since the author’s conversations with these women took place decades after the war ended, the subject matter most certainly adheres to that of a “distanced image.” In his article “The Literature in the Journalism of Nobel Prize Winner Svetlana Alexievich”, Hartsock says, “What makes reportage literature fascinating is precisely its ability to satisfy . . . different expectations, especially in that through its commitment to concrete experience it resists easy assimilation into the machines of propaganda” (46). Thus, the label of reportage literature may be applied provisionally until other works with the same framework appear, necessitating the need to reassess its suitability.

## **5. Conclusion: Something Old, Something New**

With the publication of works like *The Unwomanly Face of War*, one must

recognize the fact that “Soviet War Literature” as a term has not encompassed all textual representations of what was commonly referred to as The Great Patriotic War. Traditionally, it has been a genre that has followed a specific propagandist formula which adhered to the conventions of Socialist Realism. Now that an increasing number of “atypical” war narratives have been published since the 1980’s, the question arises about whether to expand the scope of the genre, or simply use a different classification altogether. In the case of Alexievich, the latter appears to be more suitable. This is given that Soviet Literature was a product of that period; whereas, the publication and celebration of her work, which focuses on key periods of Soviet history, belongs to a genre which could not thrive during the period it discusses. In fact, *The Unwomanly Face of War* represents a turning point in that the documentation of collective memory in the former Soviet Union has gradually changed along with history. Thus, the texts that emerge out of this evolution are not “Soviet”, or even “Post-Soviet”, but rather something new and in-between. Hence, while scholars and non-scholars alike attempt to give these texts a name, it is sufficient in the meantime to simply acknowledge that Alexievich has succeeded in weaving together individual truths which combine to form one larger truth that is at once polyphonic and harmonic; tailored, but genuine.

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