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Waves of Pure Lemon: Afterthoughts

Since I was given two opportunities to present my 1996 video, *Waves of Pure Lemon*, at the Seventh Annual Virginia Woolf conference, I expected the two screenings to vary somewhat. Relatively unknown filmmakers rarely attract large audiences, so I imagined that few people would attend the first screening, and those few who did show up would be looking for diversion, a chance to relax their intellects between the early-afternoon panel sessions, and the late-afternoon activities. Coming without expectations, this group would be pleasantly surprised by what they saw, and would talk up my piece afterward. So the small coterie for the Friday screening would be followed by an enormous crowd on Saturday. This crowd, however, would come with expectations, seeking a totally fulfilling aesthetic and intellectual experience. And I imagined they would leave disappointed, wondering what Friday's audience had seen in this brief, and decidedly amateur, black and white film.

The actual screenings were quite a bit different than my paranoid musings foresaw. Thankfully, I had good crowds for both of them. They were good in the sense that they came close to filling the conference room I'd been assigned to, but also because both audiences received my piece enthusiastically. In fact, at one of the screenings, a woman, in tears, who had just come from a previous session where Virginia Woolf's suicide had been discussed, commented, "There's her echo; there was her audience." She was alluding to the subject of *Waves of Pure Lemon*, a woman, now 70, recalling the experience of reading Virginia Woolf at the age of 16. As a "common reader," this woman, Muriel Heineman, found in Virginia Woolf a close friend, a sister, who understood her intimately. But there is also something uncommon about Muriel's response to Virginia Woolf, a reflection, or "echo," that seems unique to a girl of 16, suffering from depression, and seeking a kindred spirit.

Waves of Pure Lemon is primarily a film about influence. The narration follows Muriel's personal recollections back over half a century to her junior year in high school, in 1941. Initially, Muriel was influenced by her high-school English teacher, who encouraged her to read contemporary women writers, just for the pleasure of reading them. A stack of books in the back of the classroom, the teacher's private library, was open territory for the students to explore at their whim. It was there that Muriel discovered *To The Lighthouse*, and quickly fell under the influence of Virginia Woolf. *To The Lighthouse* was for Muriel at 16, "a watershed experience." She was reminded of her childhood in Beirut, Lebanon, where she could see from her bedroom window overlooking the Mediterranean a lighthouse on the point. But even more importantly, she had found someone who had put into words, the thoughts and feelings that made up the most secret areas of her private experience. The title of *Waves of Pure Lemon* comes from this passage in *To The Lighthouse*, which Muriel says, "caught" her:

[T]he blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstacy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced across the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough! (*TTL*, p. 65)

But *Waves of Pure Lemon* has something of a tragic rhythm to it. There is a sadness in the archival black and white photos of Muriel as a child that seems destined to reveal itself in the film. The moment comes when Muriel, after rereading the novel at the age of 70, recalls the trauma of discovering, shortly after she had finished reading *To The Lighthouse* for her highschool English class, that Virginia Woolf had just committed suicide. It is this emotional moment that forms the climax of the film. She felt as though she had lost her "best friend," her "mother," someone who had taught her that it was OK to see and feel at such an intense level, but then negated everything she had said by taking her own life. Fraught with the conflicting emotions of anger, betrayal and profound loneliness that Muriel felt at 16, her desire to come to terms with Woolf's suicide at age 70 is no less poignant because of the half-century of depression that Muriel has experienced in the interim. A lifetime of battling depression has given Muriel a reservoir of empathy for others engaged in the struggle, and a deep appreciation for Virginia Woolf's contribution to her consistent recoveries.

Technically, *Waves of Pure Lemon* has much in common with all successful low-budget underground films; its vices have become its virtues. Audiences at the Seventh Annual Virginia Woolf Conference were quick to point out how well gradually bringing the waves into focus as they crashed along the beach conveyed the feeling of revisiting a distant memory. I was a little slower to admit my problems finding the focus while shooting those waves. A graduate student at the conference commented on how realistic the seagulls sounded in the background audio. I had to tell her that I would relay her compliment to my pet zebra finches, which I had been forced to record in lieu of actual seagulls. But I think the most revealing insight about *Waves of Pure Lemon* was made by a man who pointed out that "the film is a tribute to a teacher." He was remarking on Muriel's debt of gratitude to her highschool English teacher, the understated heroine of the piece. It was she who introduced Muriel, not just to Virginia Woolf and other women writers of the early twentieth century, but to the lifelong habit of reading for pleasure, as well. I think this comment is so appropriate because of the way it echoes with my own intentions as the filmmaker. *Waves of Pure Lemon* is a tribute to a teacher. I like to think of the film as a tribute to my teacher, Muriel Heineman, who, among many other things, introduced me to Virginia Woolf.

Work Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *To The Lighthouse*. Orlando: Harvest, 1989.