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# A Documentary Film on Fire: Les terribles vivantes/Firewords

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# A Documentary Film on Fire: *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords*

Louise Forsyth

> J'écris et je ne veux plus faire cela toute seule. Je nous veux. Faire craquer, grincer, grincher l'histoire. La vie privée est politique. . . . Je parle.
>
> — Nicole Brossard, "L'écrivain" 75, 80

> Écrire: je suis une femme est plein de conséquences.
>
> — Nicole Brossard, *L'amèr ou le chapitre effrité* 43

## Introduction

In making the 1986 feature-length documentary film *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords*, with its inflammatory titles in French and English,[1] filmmaker Dorothy Todd Hénaut[2] celebrated the bold creative works and ardently feminist ideas of three *québécoises* writers: Louky Bersianik,[3] Jovette Marchessault,[4] and Nicole Brossard.[5] These writers were all influential in the radical transformation of the role of women occurring through the 1970s and 1980s in Quebec. They had already produced and published by the mid-1980s as poets, novelists, essayists, and playwrights a major oeuvre comprising literary and theoretical work that was of compelling significance at the time and that retains its interest today for its perceptive truths and enduring beauty. The film creates the impression for viewers of actually being fortunate enough to meet these writers, appreciate some of their works, hear their voices speaking directly to them, feel their passions, accompany them in their explorations in inner and outer spaces, and listen in on their conversations, each revealing her particular approach to creative innovation, critical thought, and feminist analysis. The film provides a taste of what was already an impressive intertext in the feminine in Quebec.

By taking us into the personal spaces of these women, the film brings to life the effervescent spirit of the times. Since the 1960s, the status of women in Quebec had been undergoing rapid and profound change, partly because of the revolutionary political situation, the powerful chal-

lenge to the tyrannical role played by the Catholic Church in all personal and socio-cultural affairs (particularly harsh control of the lives of girls and women), the entirely transformed public education system, and the revolutionary spirit of the times. Girls and women throughout Quebec society were finding themselves *free to be me* in the 1960s. As a result, they were prepared to grasp the thrilling personal and collective opportunities available to them to determine what it meant to enjoy such freedom. For many women, this led to critical examinations of conditions in their personal lives, including the right to make their own decisions in all matters involving their sexed and gendered bodies. Creative and theoretical writers were exploring the complex relationships between gender and writing, between sexual politics and cultural production. Many, such as the writers featured in *Les terribles vivantes/ Firewords*, chose writing and activism, with particular attention paid to the performative powers of language, discourse, and representation. They believed that the way to produce real changes in individual lives and in society as a whole was through illuminating minds, imaginations, emotions, and sensitivities with new creative approaches in poems, songs, stories, novels, plays, performances, comics, visual arts, films, and non-fiction texts.

Along with the three writers featured in the film, novelist, short-story writer, and essayist Gail Scott makes occasional appearances; screenwriter, playwright, and feminist activist Marthe Blackburn and award-winning screen actor Andrée Lachapelle play in the Marchessault section; and woman of theatre Pol Pelletier, co-founder in 1979 of Montreal's Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes, appears in the film's opening sequence drawn from Bersianik's *L'Euguélionne* and in extracts from *Les vaches de nuit* in the Marchessault section. In addition to these well-known stage and screen performers, the film is enhanced in its aesthetic and expository excellence by the appearance of a number of actors, visual artists and animators, technology experts, translators, adapters, video artists, musicians, and composers of original music. Among its many qualities, the film can be seen as a venture exploring through women's eyes and minds the revitalized arts of popular culture when women are recognized as present and active. As well, it draws attention to the ways in which language and form are discursively transformed when society's received ideologies are questioned. Words used differently in poetry, fiction, and even non-fiction have sufficient power

to bring into reality previously unseen or unimagined selves, knowledge, communities, and geographies.

*Les terribles vivantes/Firewords* is a cinematographically innovative film, shot and edited with great sensitivity. It weaves together extracts from major works that the three writers published before 1986, their personal reflections and memories, visits to places that they frequent, have frequented, or imagined, feminist analyses, along with bold explorations, conversations, archival clips, whimsical art pieces, songs, and digital images. The film constructs a tapestry of words, sounds, and visual elements in a panorama inhabited by feminist artists reaching out for new kinds of representation, for new versions and visions of what is real. The film follows the example of Brossard's *Écrivain* in refusing to observe the ideologically determined limits and barriers constructed by the conventional forms still operative when patriarchal norms exercise their implacable control. Reflecting the audacious spirit of the time and thus showing no need to explain why or how, Brossard's *Écrivain* asserts laconically in *La nef des sorcières* "J'écris. . . . Je parle" (75, 80).

Hénaut's positioning of the film as burning in its urgency is evident right from the top in the titles chosen for it. They convey well her particular way of seeing and appreciating the *écriture au féminin* of these authors. Their writing challenges viewers and readers to question their own personal circumstances in order to enter spaces that are conceptually burning. These are troubling spaces inhabited by thinking women who affirm their full autonomy and are vibrantly alive, in search of respect for their untrammelled right to freedom. They burn with an intensity that could serve to melt down the fictionalized realities of the world constructed through the centuries by powerful sexist traditions and the phallogocentrism[6] at the heart of cultural practice.

Louky Bersianik, with her outrageously irreverent wit, invented the expression *les terribles vivantes* to represent the formidable grandeur of women speaking out from the silences that have long kept them in what were deemed appropriate places for them. She considers as giants such free spirits claiming access to speech, representation, and action on public stages as their legitimate right: "Des géantes . . . c'est la femme qui devient visible."[7] Bersianik discusses in the film her use of the expression, saying that, like a small mouse emerging from its hole and coming into sight, a woman who thinks critically and appears in full visibility

using words on her own terms succeeds in disturbing the tranquility of the patriarchal status quo. Her words are so unexpected and unusual, so out of place, that — small as she is — she is seen as a monster who must be stopped, captured, destroyed, and removed: "Elle t'apparaît tellement monstrueuse!" Bersianik made frequent use in other texts at about the same time of the limitless connotations suggested by the expression *les terribles vivantes*.[8]

The film opens with and is periodically punctuated by bursts of celebratory fireworks and images of spirals in motion. These are implicit commentaries on the sizzling power of the works and actions of these writers: explosive creativity in the feminine taking surprising forms as dynamic imaginations pursue their investigations in corners that have usually remained in the dark. Hénaut films the writers actually inscribing their words on pages. She captures them in action, in the rooms where they read and write, at their places of creativity, usually with a desk, pen, typewriter, paper, computer, and printer at hand. In each of the three sections of the film, the camera tarries long enough to give life to the very act and material feeling of hands writing words on paper — writing as a process of transgressive invention departing from the norms of male-centred discourse, writing as an operation in an imaginative space where it is possible to construct new fictions and new realities. The written text is a site of women's political and spiritual strength, collective affirmation, artistic nourishment, poetic reclamation, resistance, confrontation, disruption, and rupture.

But Hénaut does not represent these women exclusively as writers or activists. Alone and together, the many facets of their identities shown in the film bring them to life as complex and richly human individuals. They are people whom viewers could be, meet, and know. Their appearances are framed in the film with fanciful or realistic images, some digitally produced, occasional ludic puppets, original music, landscapes of the natural world and cities, food preparation with and for those they love, scientific slides showing all sorts of living things. Life is richly varied, and the writers are shown to be intensely engaged in it.

Although never intervening directly in order to explain her reasons for making this unique film, Hénaut has powerfully, though implicitly, affirmed the beauty, legitimacy, originality, importance, and strength of the voices of these writers as they speak from the perspectives of their personal experiences, their artistic and theoretical positions, and

their views of a problematic society. In so doing, and in bringing them together for animated conversations, Hénaut has also highlighted the delight and excitement that develop when women whose thoughts and senses are vibrantly alive and free from ideologically constructed censors come together, speak out, and explore, each in her own way, their bold ideas.

The film conveys clearly the view that social change, no matter how necessary, will happen only when women tell their own stories while working together in shared perspectives celebrating diversity. The unapologetic search by individual women to move beyond clichés in order to know themselves, and to find ways to give themselves accounts of their own uncensored encounters, is matched by the need for solidarity and collaboration with others. The dynamics of the film stretch seamlessly across expanses of individuality and collectivity. They succeed in conjoining women's efforts on their own to understand their particular situations and sense of self with communication, support, friendship, and exchange of goals. They share the objective of bringing into reality what has not yet been said, recognized, or acknowledged in socio-cultural practices, values, and traditions. Hénaut's film takes as its creative model the very principles and strategies applied in the texts of the three authors: the productive tensions at work across the apparently conflicting parameters of the quiet, inner personal quest and the angry, outer socio-political search for solidarity and engagement favouring major social change. Fresh kinds of beauty emerge when women effect creatively this fusion of apparently conflicting perspectives: *la solitaire* and *la solidaire* — at the crossroads where the intimately personal meets the collectively rational, as Brossard has frequently suggested in her elliptical expression of the approach that moves beyond received ideas of contradiction and exclusion deriving from reductive binary thinking: *l'émotion de la pensée, la pensée de l'émotion*.

Bersianik, Marchessault, and Brossard were not alone in taking explosive steps away from ties with a patriarchal culture that produced and perpetuated devastation. Waves of solidarity and collaboration were surging forth in the 1980s involving the same writers and others. Artists, critics, teachers, and students took notice, recognizing the active creative roles that they were called upon to play as receivers and interpreters of the exhilarating words that they were hearing around them. Striking manifestations of this highly energized culture can be seen in a publica-

tion, a conference, and a video that I mention here because they resonate with, while serving to prolong, the impact of *Les terribles vivantes/ Firewords*.

*La théorie, un dimanche* is an important example of women coming together to perceive, experience, and think differently. It is a collection of essays and creative texts, the fruit of bimonthly meetings initiated in 1983 by Brossard with the objective of its six authors exploring together theoretical questions about the meaning of feminism and feminist consciousness. Concerned about the relative absence of theoretical feminist texts written in Quebec, Brossard states in the "Liminaire" of the volume that she and the other writers represented in the collection agreed on the urgency of asking "Qu'est-ce qui est incontournable dans le féminisme?" (8). Texts by three of the authors who participated in *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords* (Bersianik,[9] Brossard, and Scott) appear in *La théorie, un dimanche*. Three other leading feminist *québécoises* writers — Louise Cotnoir, Louise Dupré, and France Théoret — joined them in their meetings and in this publication. Their essays address topical theoretical and socio-political issues of concern. Together they offer original perspectives on empirical and ontological matters and views: knowledge, language, aesthetics, critical reception, values, and morality as framed by the results of feminist analysis. Following each essay, the personal voice of the author is heard in the form of a creative text. This means that expository writing and creative writing are intermingled in the volume, a unique and innovative conjoining of socio-political activism, theoretical reflection, and poetics, as seen in *Les terribles vivantes/ Firewords*.

Yet another happening served to celebrate collaboration and collective action, drawing women out from the silences constructed for them by patriarchal, even misogynistic, values and practices. *La théorie un dimanche: Sweet Suite* is a video of the presentations made by five of the writers featured in *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords* (Scott was absent) at a meeting of the American Council for Quebec Studies in Montreal in 2000. The conference papers represent a follow-up to *La théorie, un dimanche* but add yet another dimension to the conversation on the meaning of feminism and feminist awareness. These are new essays, particularly powerful in the personal dimensions that they bring to the conversation. The conference session adopted the same overall format as *La théorie, un dimanche*, that of a theoretical essay delivered by each writer,

followed by the reading of a poem or poetic text. Thus, the publication and the video took the same approach to writing in the feminine as *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords* in offering a fusion of intellectual, personal, socio-political, and poetic words, both objective studies and creative texts in which the perspectives brought by subjectivity were central.

The video shows that this international conference was well attended and well received. There was an obvious consensus on the need for these and additional theoretical pieces from the radical feminist perspective of the authors and for their pieces to be published to reach educational and larger audiences. The enthusiastic reception also reflected agreement that expository and creative writing should not be seen as binary opposites. Indeed, effective feminist activism requires that the rational mind, along with emotions and fantasies of the imagination, work together.

These three artifacts — the film *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords*, the publication *La théorie, un dimanche*, and the video *La théorie un dimanche: Sweet Suite* — provide eloquent testimony of the dynamic and creative feminist environment in Quebec in the 1970s and 1980s. There was an explosion of visionary and clear-thinking feminist writers and artists working in literary fields and a wide range of arts and media, exploring with imagination and vision — in the manner of Bersianik, Marchessault, Brossard, and Hénaut — the conceivability of a socio-political and cultural universe, along with a material world functioning in the feminine.

*Les terribles vivantes/Firewords* begins with impressive displays of fireworks, the sounds of their explosions accompanied by the voices of people in crowds. These images and sounds dramatize the passionate energy in search of authenticity driving the writing of Bersianik, Marchessault, and Brossard. This scene is the first instance of a kind of punctuation that occurs throughout the film through dazzling explosions and various images of spirals. Spirals, which have recurred regularly in the sculptures and texts of Marchessault and been celebrated as *la forme ardente* for Brossard, are iconic feminist symbols representing dynamically forceful waves and cycles, movements of life itself, forms that never arrive at closure, winding paths toward insight and self-realization.

These incendiary starting moments of the film open onto a luminous sequence when the extraterrestrial Euguélionne, the central character of Bersianik's novel of that title, arrives on Earth and meets female and

male Earthlings played by life-size, somewhat dishevelled, painted statues created by Francine Gagné. As a female who has already achieved full self-knowledge and set out on her chosen path, the Euguélionne is in search of her positive planet and the male of her species. Her cosmic search, which quickly shows itself to be futile if she expects to find what she seeks on Earth, lays the thematic groundwork for the film. Whereas the male statues complacently assure the Euguélionne that here on *la planète des hommes* she has found what she seeks, the female statues reveal immediately and with obvious irony the anomalous and subservient situation of women on this planet: "Nous sommes des femmes, mais des Hommes également puisque nous faisons partie de l'espèce Humaine, — *Autrement dit . . . un homme sur deux est une femme!*" This discouraging bit of down-to-earth logic in the fanciful sequence of these opening moments elicits spontaneous laughter from the ebullient Euguélionne, who immediately sees through the abuse of language underlying the self-deception of the planet's inhabitants.

**Louky Bersianik**

The relevance of this striking introduction in *Les terribles vivantes/ Firewords* to the absurdity of patriarchally determined belief systems is immediately clear in the first section of the film, which features Bersianik and some of her works. She is in her home in a small town. She is comfortably dressed, surrounded by books, getting ready to write, thinking out loud as she goes about her intention to write in resistance to injustice: "Je veux écrire en toute lucidité pour faire acte de résistance."

This private moment allows Hénaut to introduce Bersianik as a sympathetic and unassuming woman and writer prepared to welcome the viewer into her home and to share with that person the simple pleasures of what she does most days. An introduction to the writer and her personal space occurs as well in the Marchessault and Brossard sections. In each case, the space is different. Although the techniques used in these sequences do not offer explanations of why the authors feel at home in their spaces, the film succeeds in making the viewer feel the emotional and conceptual bonds among them, their works, and the places that they have chosen. During these introductory moments, the writers unpretentiously but passionately make themselves known as individuals. There are moments when they are speaking directly to the

camera, and in other scenes they are writing or otherwise going about their lives inside and outside their homes, spending some time in public spaces. At other times, they are working while clips of their works are read by narrators.

The following sequence in the Bersianik section of the film allows the viewer to accompany her for coffee and conversation on an outdoor patio with Brossard and Scott. Together they reflect on the conflicting emotions and difficult passages in the lives of women when, after marriage, they dare to shift from the roles that they are expected to play as determined by patriarchal norms to the new ways of personal prioritizing produced by feminist awareness. Bersianik's words offer powerful advice to *les femmes de la terre* to protect their independence, choose the paths right for them when seen in the light of their own experiences, and savour the power of their own sensuality. Sensual energy and desire nurture their autonomy as individuals with a right to their own emotions and ideas.

During their patio conversation, Bersianik, Scott, and Brossard share their unease as writers when they encounter the systemic influence of sexism in the received structures and usage patterns of discourse. These linguistic norms impose limitations, distortions, violence, and inhibitions on women. They have a significant impact on the reception of their works among publishers and critics.

A return to this patio conversation in the Brossard section of the film shows her explaining in theoretical terms her view that words used differently by strong and creative women have started to move in spiralling ways within the narrow confines of patriarchal discourse, normally considered to be the field where things already make sense and are taken to be faithful representations of reality. As these subversive moves in the feminine have been gaining momentum, the words of creative women exercising their imaginations have moved outside the patriarchally determined confines and into areas that might be deemed nonsense according to established practices but where words make new kinds of sense for women and girls. The liminal position in which Brossard situates these new voices of women and sees them on the move into and out of known realities holds the promise of feminist spaces that function as paratopias where women in search of their own planet are not entirely removed from patriarchal languages, structures, systems, and discourses but where they nevertheless see the world around them differently. This

liminality has made it possible for them to move in still uncharted directions in which they are free to use and invent words that allow them to roam creatively, conceptually, emotionally, and playfully.

The final scenes of the first section of *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords* devoted to Bersianik move away from the political and theoretical elements of her writing and in the direction of conviviality, spirituality, and poetry. We recall her many dazzling images associated with water as she walks on the wharf by the Saint Lawrence River, enveloped in the tranquility of the natural world, and sits quietly soaking in the kaleidoscopically nuanced colours of its rolling waves. We enter a reading of her poetry and a concert in which Judith Chevalier and Richard Séguin sing a musical version of the exquisite poem "Le testament de la Folle Alliée," in which the refrain expresses her intimate connection with water, the ocean, and the natural world, as is evident from the start of the poem:

> Fille ou frisson
> Fruit ou chanson
> Peu m'importe l'habit
> Pourvu qu'en naissant
> Je sois l'océan
> (*Axes et eau* 109)

At the end of this concert, Bersianik reads and Chevalier sings the wonderfully sensual and sexually explicit "La gynosensualité":

> Ô ma ralentie
> Tu vas de l'inquiétude frissonnante
> La jouissance insupportable
> Et tu remontes vers la terreur
> Et redescends vers le bonheur . . .
>
> La caresse est révolutionnaire, dit Ancyl.
> Et s'il y avait un troisième sexe
> Je serais trisexuelle.
> (*Maternative* 27-28)

**Jovette Marchessault**

As in the opening moments of the Bersianik section, the second section of the film — featuring Marchessault, her sculptures, and her plays — takes viewers into personal moments and places that have played essen-

tial roles in her work as an artist, intellectual, and passionately engaged woman. In the case of Marchessault, Hénaut knew that telling this story meant going back to Marchessault's childhood.

The opening scene of this section takes the viewer into a recreation of her childhood, when Marchessault discovered and savoured the inexhaustible riches of the natural world. The scene depicts her as a girl (played by Raphaëlle Nadeau) taking in the sights, smells, and sounds in the forest with her beloved grandmother (played by Marthe Blackburn). Everything is alive and awake in the forest. These moments of peace, love, and enhanced awareness anticipate the path that Marchessault would choose for her life and career as a completely committed artist. This is made even more clear when the girl and her grandmother return home. They quickly sit down at the table to create drawings representing what they have experienced. The child has learned to see and feel the mysteries and inner energies of everything in nature. At the same time, she spontaneously associates this vision with its expression in words. In speaking the languages of the animals and plants in the forest, "elle voit l'âme de la terre." Seeing the soul of the Earth stirs in her the cosmic desire to find words that illuminate the universe: "Il me semble important de créer de nouvelles constellations de mots qui seront comme des comètes." This rich sensory and spiritual sensitivity that needs words to illuminate the night sky lies at the heart of the plays and novels written by Marchessault, as well as her *telluric* sculptures, several of which are shown in the film. She became an artist and writer functioning as the voice of the sun: "Je suis en mesure de prononcer les mots de la lumière."

Like Bersianik and Brossard, Marchessault's full engagement as an artist is intimately linked with her sense of self as a sensitive, sensual, and sexual being. Marchessault says in the film that, in addition to her profound sensitivity to the soul of the natural world, her work has been consistently influenced by her being lesbian. She insists that this is a powerful attachment to women in their entire being, much more than physical desire for a woman's body alone, though physicality and materiality are never excluded: "[U]n sentiment complet, non seulement un désir physique, c'est aussi une admiration, une affection, quelque chose d'énorme."

Following the sequence recalling Marchessault's special times as a child with her grandmother, the scene shifts to the yard of her rural home in the present, the camera following the members of what

Marchessault calls wittily and with great affection her "groupe de thérapie": cats, chickens, ducks, geese, horses, and a dog. As we move around the yard with her, we savour the beauty and startling originality of her sculptures, her *femmes telluriques*. Marchessault launched her career as an innovative but impoverished sculptor while she was living in Montreal, scavenging in garbage dumps for objects that she could transform into these *women rising from the earth*. She found this transformation of junk to be appropriate for her feminist purposes since, as she says in the film, "On traite un peu les femmes de cette façon-là; on les met facilement aux vidanges, aux rebuts." Almost every sculpture has a painting of a spiral at its heart or on its surface because of the beauty and vitality that the shape of the spiral represents for her: "Il n'y a pas de forme de vie où la spirale n'apparaît pas. . . . C'est aussi une forme très dynamique. C'est une propulsion."

Marchessault speaks of the poverty of her early years following her grandmother's death, of the move into a factory job at the age of thirteen and then into office cleaning. Always motivated to be an artist, she was jolted into recognition of her own extraordinary talent as a painter and sculptor when she saw one of her own pieces hanging in a senior administration office that she was cleaning. Her work was hanging side by side on the same wall with works by Riopelle and Chagall. Despite the thunderbolt of this realization, the cost of art supplies prevented her from pursuing a career as a visual artist, important as that period of drawing and sculpting was in nurturing her already great talent. Marchessault chose to be a writer because that had always been her wish and because of the low cost of writing supplies. She already had paper and a typewriter. They were sufficient. The scene in the film focusing on her hands as they write and produce words celebrating the very magic of these hands captures the irresistible and transformative power that the words exercise as they fly high, like the kite that we see her flying with obvious delight.

Hénaut chose to feature the work of Marchessault as a playwright despite the beauty and depth of the novels with which she began her writing career. Writing was always a solitary activity for her. Yet, like Bersianik, she indicates in the film that she sees the act of writing in a wider context. For Marchessault, writing is a rewarding exchange that enables the writer to reach out to others and build bonds with readers who understand and participate in the creative process, thanks to their

willingness to enter into and interpret her words. She says in the film that theatre became for her a collective creative activity allowing her as a playwright to give her plays as gifts to others working with her to put on shows — writers, directors, actors, technicians, designers, and spectators. Such creative collaboration enhances the visibility and force of women's history and culture. Marchessault was concerned about the absence of women artists from the past in accounts prepared by established historians and scholars. She found in these accounts no names, images, stories, or models that could nourish and encourage the imaginations of girls and women in their own creative acts. Marchessault mentions once again her grandmother, who believed that girls must have models, words, and images. Because of this conviction that the lives of women of the past must be reclaimed, the importance of their work recognized, and the suffering that they endured in creating their art appreciated, most of her theatrical works have richly nuanced representations of historical female artists as their main characters.

Marchessault's dramaturgical career was launched with stunning success in 1978 when the monologue *Les vaches de nuit* was created by Pol Pelletier at the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes. Following this moving success, *Les vaches de nuit* went on to the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in March the following year during the evening of feminist *célébrations* marking International Women's Day 1979. In *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords*, Pelletier is seen on a rocky site playing extracts from *Les vaches de nuit* in a simple costume suggesting millennial forces of femininity. She dons a bovine skull reminiscent of Georgia O'Keefe's famous iconography. The play begins with the startling words "Ma mère est une vache. Avec moi, ça fait deux" (*Tryptique lesbien* 83). It was a galvanizing moment in the 1970s, still nestled in the memories of those fortunate enough to be there. It is still powerfully paradoxical enough to awaken strong emotions when viewed in *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords*.

The success of *Les vaches de nuit* was soon followed for Marchessault by a succession of wonderful biographical plays, all bringing to fictional life women artists, primarily writers, of the past: *La saga des poules mouillées* (1981), *La terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc* (1982), *Alice et Gertrude, Natalie et Renée et ce cher Ernest* (1984), *Anaïs dans la queue de la comète* (1985), and *Le voyage magnifique d'Emily Carr* (1990). The film provides glimpses of the covers of the plays published prior to the making of *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords*. Andrée Lachapelle is seen in

the film in scenes from *Anaïs* and heard expressing her great admiration for the play and her emotion in playing the title role.

**Nicole Brossard**

The opening sequence in the Brossard section shows her driving alone at night in downtown Montreal, her original city by the sea. The polysemic eroticism of this city resonates with her intense sensitivity and lucidity. She and the nocturnal urban environment breathe together. The night takes on the colours of the dawn. The affective force of this fertile environment is joined intimately as Brossard speaks in this opening scene of spaces for tables: the table in her home where, frequently at night, she writes, reads, thinks, or meditates, as well as tables in cafés or restaurants where she meets other women. They gather around tables as creative feminists engaged in innovative explorations drawing on the power of words.

In these supportive environments, Brossard has been inspired by things not seen yet present to her, all that remains invisible but is nevertheless powerfully there and real. It has been urgent for her in her writing to bring to light and visibility that which requires no previous material presence in order to exist, that which is hidden beneath shrouds of silence, taking the form of mysteries hovering in the darkness where her imagination takes flight: "Cette nuit je me rencontre. . . . J'ai choisi la nuit pour parler au grand jour. . . . Je parle pour me donner une voie d'accès, un trou d'horizon . . . comment on reprend la nuit la couleur de l'aube." The same compelling sense of luminous realities still unsaid but waiting to be spoken and heard in transforming received notions of reality arises frequently in the Brossard section of the film during the conversations and during the scenes in her home when she is seated in front of a large painting by Irene F. Whittome representing handwritten fragments of letters or words with no immediately recognizable meaning, form, or image coming directly from the painting. The fragments suggest words that wander, break, undulate, float, evoke forgotten associations, or stop. They are without any obvious direction or even an up and down. Such tantalizing yet inaccessible suggestions of obstructed sense, perceived to be emerging from the fragments, can be troubling. Indeed, Brossard has often been accused of being difficult, even unreadable, since the meanings of her texts are never immediately simple and clear, respectful of dominant conventions. She plays with

words and forms in her writing, always leaving spaces for ambiguity and polyvalence to enter the game. These are spaces through which readers can enter the texts and make sense for themselves. Readers must dare to take risks, be unsure, follow mysterious traces, and be left hanging: "Une intention dans mon écriture c'est de créer du trouble au moment de la lecture . . . quand on est troublée on est forcée de s'interroger — le trouble modifie notre champ de conscience."

As she speaks to the camera in front of the beautiful and enigmatic painting installed at the heart of her home, Brossard offers reflections on her transformative journey in becoming an award-winning, radical feminist writer and cultural activist. She recalls the moment of the birth of her daughter, which produced profound changes in her sense of self as a woman and an autonomous individual. In this new experience of maternity, she found herself responsible for and intimately involved in the lives and daily affairs of not one but two bodies. This was a challenging new departure. The stereotypes of motherhood had a potentially devastating impact on her sense of self as a woman, a poet, and an intellectual: "[M]a présence au monde s'est complètement transformée." Recognizing that this transformation and the pressures that came rushing in from well-established stereotypes of maternity and motherhood were having the seriously deleterious effect of diminishing her creative power — "comme si le ventre se retrouvait à la place du cerveau" — Brossard proceeded almost immediately to *kill* the womb in its symbolic connotations and as it is discursively represented through a patriarchal lens: "C'est le combat. . . . J'ai tué le ventre. . . . Mamelle, une seule vie, la mienne" (*L'amèr* 6, 11).

Around the same time as the birth of her daughter, Brossard fell in love with a woman. This was a physical, sexual, spiritual, and intellectual experience that, along with being a mother, shattered definitively her previously established sense of reality and identity, transformed her presence in the world, made the meanings of words change, explode, shatter, and unfold. Brossard quickly came to think that lesbian feminists had the power as *urban radicals*[10] to challenge the entire patriarchal system, its knowledge base, its practices, and the contrived realities on the basis of which it has long affirmed legitimacy and the values that it imposes on women.

For Brossard, who has sustained a keen interest in science throughout her career, the driving energy and fortifying power of the words of

urban radical lesbians (whom she associates in a dynamic and positive way with amazons and witches) are like those of nature itself in their powerful life-supporting role. Hénaut captures at the end of the film, using slides of living forms, this cosmic vision of what life could be if women's creative powers were in a position to function with their full magical potential in harmony with their own sensitivities and the vigorous pulse of the natural world.

**Conclusion**

In *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords*, the three authors share their passion for words with unconventional meanings and incongruously original associations. They use, discover, displace, or invent these words with playfulness, imagination, vision, and impudence in bold departures from the norms of literary creation. *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords* is a celebration of the authors' passion for writing in a deliberate ludic manner while knowing, as they do, that their texts will encounter resistance from critics and members of the public not prepared for change in the comfortable socio-cultural patterns with which they are familiar and in which they are personally invested. The writers are keenly aware of verbal and discursive abuses that have deprived girls and women of the fullness of the lives that they might live, the knowledge that they might have, and the models that history might have provided. Their texts derive from the conviction that, without spoken and written words that resonate with the conditions of one's existence, there can be no overall conception in space or time of what is real, no certainty of knowing who or where one is, and no possibility of communicating with others shared notions of identity, reality, community, memory, truth, desire, and values. The bold objective for Bersianik, Marchessault, Brossard, and Hénaut is to bring into full light that which has remained overlooked, unacknowledged, and insignificant or frivolous, that which has remained in epistemological shadows and therefore has been fertile ground for building patriarchal societies and their institutionalized cultures rooted in inequity, injustice, and violence.

Together and with others, they explore realms where thought, emotion, and sensation are not mutually exclusive, where mind and body interact holistically, where self and other find complicity, where nature and culture, subjectivity and objectivity, memories and present circumstances, ecstasy and pain are intertwined, conjoined as integral compon-

ents of the full complex of each individual's experience and inner space. By throwing into question the underlying and usually unexamined presuppositions derived from dominant systems — along with how they have been contrived — the film brings to exhilarating life the refreshing and rich fullness of creative works in the feminine.

Hénaut captures the uncompromising spirit of Quebec women writers and artists surging forth in the 1970s and 1980s. She shows them working creatively, thoughtfully, imaginatively, and quirkily to make their voices heard and to bring their creative works into visibility in public spaces. These writers were carrying out bold explorations of what it means to be a woman in a sexed and gendered body in contemporary society, which has not yet rid itself of the powerful influence of patriarchal ideologies. The film is an implicit yet forceful denunciation of the dangerous words, structures, institutions, and practices of universally entrenched sexist systems. At the same time, it is a celebration of the beauty and the vigour of women's lives and ideas, of their writing.

The writing of Bersianik, Marchessault, and Brossard invites readers to contemplate shades of darkness in the realities of the world that they inhabit through the lens of the beauty of their own personal and shared experiences. The terrible harmony of Hénaut's film supports such a complex response in that the words spoken as well as the visual and musical images that run through it come together in stunning contrapuntal fusion, taking full creative advantage of technical cinematographic innovation. The film brings an impressive alternative vision to the perspective usually adopted by critics when it comes to artistic creation by women. Critics trained through traditional approaches in the norms, conventions, and criteria of the literary world and its genres too often have been impervious to the beauty and significance of works inspired by imaginative processes working in the feminine. As a result, women's creative works have frequently been met through the centuries with silence, incomprehension, indifference, misconception, scorn, or rejection, attitudes frequently in place before critics, scholars, and members of the public have even looked at the work itself. This has deprived women of the very words and encounters that could legitimize their ways of seeing and being in the world. In tune with such closure, women themselves have tended to self-censor. The works of female writers and artists have remained unnoticed, unappreciated, outside historical accounts, unrecognized for any impact that they might have had

on each other, usually unpublished, or largely tucked into some bottom drawer. Hénaut has heard their voices and seen them as artists creating alone and in the dynamic company of each other. Her approach in this film brings them into the open fields of public discourse. In doing so, she provides striking evidence that these dynamic artists are fully autonomous physically, socially, and intellectually, lucidly present in their own spaces and in those that they share, thinking critically and imaginatively, and being *terribly alive*. They are determined to position themselves, individually and collectively, in a no-man's land of their construction, not entirely separate from mainstream society and its cultures, but outside the control of those in whose interests it is to enforce patriarchal practices imposed on women for millennia.

## Notes

[1] My recollection from the 1970s and 1980s is that communication and dialogue among francophone and anglophone feminist writers, artists, scholars, and students were much more regular and dynamic than they are today. Feminist translators were making exciting works available across language divides. Early examples of these encounters across cultures and languages were the 1981 Dialogue Conference held at York University and the 1983 conference In the Feminine: Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots organized in Vancouver by the West Coast Women and Words Society. The copious bilingual collections of essays emerging from these conferences — *Gynocritics: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing/Gynocritiques: Démarches féministes à l'écriture des Canadiennes et Québécoises* and *Women and Words: The Anthology/Les femmes et les mots: Une anthologie* — provide eloquent evidence of the exciting feminist literary scene already in place from coast to coast and in both languages. The bilingual journal *Tessera* was founded in 1984 to provide an ongoing forum for feminist literary theory and theoretically informed feminist writing. Barbara Godard's impressive "Bibliography of Feminist Criticism in Canada and Quebec" contained in *Gynocritics/Gynocritiques* shows with striking clarity that writing in the feminine, along with major works of feminist criticism, had already brought into being a rich new body of art and knowledge.

[2] Dorothy Todd Hénaut (born 1935), who has several beautiful investigative films to her credit as a producer, director, and writer, was a full-time member for several years of Studio D at the National Film Board. Studio D was founded in 1974 at the start of International Women's Year and International Women's Decade. It was Kathleen Shannon who recommended the creation of Studio D and who became its executive director, with the express purpose of encouraging and supporting francophone and anglophone women filmmakers. Studio D was the first government-funded film studio dedicated to women filmmakers in the world. It became one of the NFB's most celebrated filmmaking units, winning awards for originality, innovation, and technical quality and breaking distribution records. Hénaut began her career at the NFB as a member of Challenge for Change (1968). *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords* is among the groundbreaking films of Studio D's impressive repertoire. Other major films made by Hénaut during her years at Studio D include *The*

*New Alchemists/Alchimie nouvelle* (1974), *Not a Love Story: A Film about Pornography* (1981), *A Song for Quebec* (1988), *Québec un peu . . . beaucoup . . . passionnément* (1989), and *You Won't Need Running Shoes, Darling* (1996). A tribute to the aesthetic quality and socio-cultural importance of Hénaut's work in film took place at the Montréal Cinémathèque on 24 October 2018.

[3] The pseudonym Louky Bersianik was adopted by Lucile Durand (1930-2011) in the 1970s when she chose to alter her career path and become an independent creative writer: novelist, poet, essayist, songwriter, and children's fiction writer. Her first publication as Bersianik was *L'Euguélionne*. She was respected for her erudition, involving extensive knowledge of classical Greece and Rome, their cultures, and their languages.

[4] Jovette Marchessault (1938-2012) was an award-winning artist: novelist, playwright, poet, essayist, painter, and sculptor.

[5] Nicole Brossard (born 1943) is an award-winning, widely translated, internationally studied and acclaimed feminist author: poet, novelist, essayist, activist.

[6] French philosopher and theorist Jacques Derrida is normally credited with creating this expressive neologism.

[7] All quotations for which a specific source is not indicated are taken directly from *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords*.

[8] See, for example, *Le pique-nique sur l'Acropole* (227). Although Bersianik, Marchessault, and Brossard are urgently concerned about the subservient position still maintained for women by patriarchy, they do not ever represent women as victims. Nor does their anger lead them to suggest that women should take up violence. As autonomous individuals, women already have access to the words and actions that can lead them, through creative collaboration, to complete integrality as human beings.

[9] An English version of Bersianik's essay "La lanterne d'Aristote: Essai sur la critique," translated by A.J. Holden Verburg, was published earlier in *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing* as "Aristotle's Lantern: An Essay on Criticism" (39-48).

[10] With regard to Brossard's representation of creative and politically engaged lesbians whom she considers "urban women radicals," see *The Aerial Letter* (80-82).

[11] This list contains information only on the first publication and translation into English (where they exist) of the works mentioned or cited in *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords*. The authors whom I study here have simply been too prolific and too much appreciated by readers, scholars, and students to include new editions or the authors' many other works in this essay. I also do not mention the numerous secondary sources available on these works. I regret that it has not been possible to include information on these significant documentary sources. I have not noted secondary sources for Hénaut's film since, unfortunately, there has been little critical or scholarly attention paid to it.

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