

Scholars on a Picnic: Feminist Coloured Glasses

Dr. Michele Leigh

*Department of Cinema and Photography, Southern Illinois University Carbondale,
Carbondale, IL, United States of America*

www.micheleleigh.net

e-mail: drleigh@micheleleigh.net

Premise



Michele Leigh, PhD

This paper will explore the live performance of *Scholars on a Picnic: A Generative Ballet in Three Parts* through the lens of feminist critique. Borrowing from feminist scholars like Jaqueline Millner and Vicki Callahan, this paper will unpack the ways in which *Scholars on a Picnic* utilizes and creates an archive of sounds, images, texts and movement that at display, as Millner puts it, “the contemporariness of the past and its infinite malleability.” It is through this concept of infinite malleability that this paper examines the potential of generative arts practice to expand our understanding of feminist scholarship in the arts and feminist arts practice.

Wearing My Feminist Coloured Glasses

It is time to return to what feminism has to tell us.
It is time to make the case for what women have to
say about the perils of our modern world.
Jacqueline Rose, 2014 [1]

As a feminist film scholar and historian, I spend a significant amount of my time searching in archives and working to recuperate the contributions women have made to art and culture. I am particularly interested in the power of feminine/feminist aesthetics in arts practice to unseat traditional hierarchies to create a space, however liminal, where dialogues can be opened, boundaries can be pushed, and change can be enacted. The live performance “Scholars on a Picnic: A Generative Ballet in Three Acts” does just that, it calls attention to the ‘perils of our modern world’ and most

importantly, it creates a space for dialogue and potential for change.

“Scholars on a Picnic” is a collaborative event between myself, the feminist historian and my fellow performers, Robert Spahr, the 21st century dadaist and Jay Needham, the ecological composer. Our scholarly/artistic voices come together, sometimes in opposition to each other and sometimes in harmony, in a generative ballet that both evokes the past (the Bauhaus Triadic Ballet, Ballet Mecanique, and Meyerhold’s biomechanical theatre) and promises a new type of experience for the 21st century. The ballet can be understood in two ways; 1) in relation to the underlying games of Risk and the World game, and 2) in relation to the archive that it utilizes and generates.

Game Play and History

The underlying premise of the ballet, the story as it were, is based loosely on two important games developed in the middle of the 20th century: the game of *Risk* developed in the late 1950s by French writer/filmmaker Albert Lamorisse (perhaps best known for his award winning 1956 short film, *The Red Balloon*); and the *World Game* developed by American architect/designer/inventor, Buckminster Fuller in 1961. Each of the act is occupied with one of the games and is underpinned by historical connections and the rules of the individual games.

The first act is centered on Risk and is marked by the development of nation states, the growth of the military industrial complex, the rise in global power, the consolidation of wealth in the hands of the few, as well as the gradual and systematic disenfranchisement of the working classes. Grounded historically within the 18th - 20th centuries this period signifies for me a time when female voices were ignored or outright silenced.

The Entr’acte is marked by our present moment in history and is plagued by perpetual war, retrograd politics, economic extremes, fake news, and information overload. This period is cacophonous and chaotic, requiring strong, loud voices to be heard above the din.

The final act returns to the game play of the World Game, which focuses on sharing resources, distributing wealth, protecting the environment, and in general putting the preservation of species, humanity and the planet before material excess. While historically situated in the later part of the 20th century, this part of the game play is also forward thinking, and hopeful.

The power in these themes and historical underpinnings is that they too follow the generative prescriptions of the ballet, as well as, the generative aspect of game play itself. Feminist scholar Vicki Callahan notes “... envisioning temporality as a nonlinear, multidirectional flow of information rather than a singular reductive and evolutionary stream of apodictic data” is the key to creating/sharing new modes of understanding. [2] Just as a game will never be played the exact same way more than once, the ballet relies on generative processes and chance to create a historicity that is neither fixed nor linear. “Thus, history should not be seen as a static entity but rather a process of ongoing conversation with the materiality of the moment.” [3] The generative aspects of the games and the ballet, allow for a

dynamic understanding of history that is powerful in its ability to open a space for dialogue.

The Archive Generates the Ballet

The second key element to understanding the ballet is the concept of the archive. Like Callahan, Jacqueline Millner suggests a skepticism of linear time and she notes that potential for doing history differently lies in the use of the archive, “for the archive insists on the contemporariness of time and its infinite malleability,” in other words the archive is an infinitely generative tool. [4] The ballet is comprised of multiple archives, collections of sounds, images, movements and objects that are combined with the computer generated algorithms. The collections/archives generate the movements of the ballet, at the same time that they are generated by the algorithms, they create a continuous feedback loop.

In its ability to generate new material and its malleability, the archive becomes a source of feminist possibility. Each of the characters in the ballet have an archive of sounds which dictate his/her movements. The sounds which dictate my movements come from a variety of sources both personal and inspirational. They include snippets from music, films and speeches that have in some way impacted my life. For instance, there are clips of dialogue and sound from Vera Chytilova’s 1966 film *Daisies*, a film which gives voice to two young women caught in between generational discord during the Prague Spring.

Also included are clips from the activist/feminist punk band, Pussy Riot, these women literally and figuratively put their art and their lives on the line to protest Vladimir Putin and his administration (for which they received two years in prison). Other inspirational sources include works by singers like Aretha Franklin and Annie Lennox, as well as women who have impacted by life as politicians, scholars, feminists, such as: Shirley Chisholm, Laura Mulvey, bell hook, and Jane Gaines.

My character’s archive is comprised of sounds that have meaning to me, to my past, present, and future. As Millner remarks, “the archive occupies the threshold between public and private, a key feminist focus.” [5] The conflation of public/private is further conflated in the performative aspect of the ballet, which also combines gestures and movements that are at times both the intimate and personal and at other times public and distant.

Vicki Callahan, notes “The archive becomes in this context not the last edifice standing in a received history, but a dynamic agent of change and a space of becoming.” [6] Through its use of game play, generative algorithms and archival sources (personal and public), *Scholar’s on a Picnic* illustrates the potential of generative arts practice to open dialogues, to expand our understanding of feminist scholarship in the arts and feminist arts practice.

References

- [1] Rose, Jacqueline. (2014). "Preface." *Women in Dark Times*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, x.
- [2] Callahan, Vicki. (2010). "Introduction." *Reclaiming the Archive: Archaeological Explorations toward a Feminism 3.0*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- [3] Callahan, Vicki. (2010). "Gazing Outward The Spectrum of Feminist Reception History." *Reclaiming the Archive: Archaeological Explorations toward a Feminism 3.0*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- [4] Millner, Jacqueline. (2015). "Contemporary Art and Feminism: Future Feminist Archive." University of Sydney. p. 9.
[https://sydney.edu.au/sca/docs/research/contemporary-art feminism/Future_web_singlepg.pdf](https://sydney.edu.au/sca/docs/research/contemporary-art%20feminism/Future_web_singlepg.pdf). November 2, 2017.
- [5] Millner, Jacqueline. (2015). "Contemporary Art and Feminism: Future Feminist Archive." University of Sydney. p. 9.
[https://sydney.edu.au/sca/docs/research/contemporary-art feminism/Future_web_singlepg.pdf](https://sydney.edu.au/sca/docs/research/contemporary-art%20feminism/Future_web_singlepg.pdf). November 2, 2017.
- [6] Callahan, Vicki. (2010). "Introduction." *Reclaiming the Archive: Archaeological Explorations toward a Feminism 3.0*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.