

Marjorie Sturm's Alternative to Hollywood Gender Roles*By Kerri Provost*

Our culture is gendered to the degree that often these constructed roles remain on a subliminal level, at least until there is an alternative to compare with the status quo. The feminist consciousness is tuned in to the manifestation of sexism but rarely do we see our ideas of a feminist utopia realized, or even suggested. "The Films of Marjorie Sturm Volume 1" turns all of this on its head. This DVD is a collection of six of the director's short films. Sturm is described as the writer, cinematographer, director, editor, producer, and in charge of the music. More accurately, she is a self-described feminist who actually fits the label, whether it is demonstrated through blatant remarks between characters in *Smoke the Pipe Dream*, or apparent in the subtle contrasts between genders in *Treehouse*.

While Sturm's films are primarily about artistic expression, the imagery and dialogue is frequently profound and accurate. In *Treehouse* she has created a character who connects to the world through her art of photography and poetry. This character's own world is that of nature. She lives in a treehouse where the music is that of a thunderstorm and birds chirping. Only when the viewer is given a glimpse into life on the outside of this--an *après sex* image of the woman waking up in a male lover's apartment--do we realize how central the natural world is to femaleness. Sturm contrasts solitude and nature with the chaos of noise and technology. She connects all this by creating a tension between characters.

In both *Smoke the Pipe Dream* and *The Thread* Sturm questions mainstream ideals of beauty. *Smoke the Pipe Dream* features two female friends who are on a road trip. During their quest one character starts talking about a porn magazine of male nudes. The owner of the magazine explains, "I just got so sick of looking at the women and wondering if my ass measures up. . . I like men, so why am I always looking at women? They look so self-conscious, and why are they hairless?". The theme reappears in *The Thread* when a voiceover says "The surfaces are all shiny" as images of female models are flashed on the screen. Of course these themes come up in popular culture, but not in any serious way. The usual take on the subject is for a female character to complain about beauty standards while eventually buying another outfit or tube of lipstick and succumbing to the culture. In Sturm's films, her female protagonists, though absolutely human, do not alter themselves physically to attain an impossible ideal. Instead of resolving to focus on external qualities, Sturm's characters consistently and deeply turn their attention inward to the center of their selves.

As a connoisseur of pornography, I most appreciated Sturm's fresh take on human sexuality in *Voice or No Voice*. At just under ten minutes, the film expressed more about the soul, human condition, and erotica than one would find in thousands of mainstream pornographic flicks, combined. Almost every sex film that one can rent or buy at her local adult store features sexual acts between

two or more people, nearly all of whom fit a distinct gender role. The women typically have large breasts, long legs, full lips, shiny Rapunzel hair, and with some scrubbing and a few layers of clothes, can easily double as the Girl Next Door image of American Beauty: blonde hair, blue eyes, and gleefully submissive. There are exceptions to this, but the exceptions are billed as fetishes-- Asian, Trannies, Large Women, Red Heads, Latinas, et cetera. Sturm's film deconstructs human sexuality.

Voice or No Voice is sexual, political, lonely, and realistic. Gender is intentionally obscured. There are extreme close-ups of genitalia, and it is not always clear which parts we are looking at. One scene alternates between the shaving of a vulva and a penis. Generally these are parts put on display as sexual, and yet it is as if Sturm is reaching out to the viewer, asking each of us, "Is this sexual? Is this titillating? Or is this just is?". In other scenes the camera zooms in on oral sex. It is blurred. The givers of head have their own heads out of focus. Are we watching females with females, males with males, females with males, or some other option?

The motion freezes to display a text quote juxtaposed over a completely nude male. The quote is related to dictatorships and war. When not viewing sexual activities, Sturm shows scenes on a bus that is driving around a city. The themes of war, freedom, and anger return again and again. The word "death" is uttered as the camera focuses on male ejaculate which will dry up on the man's stomach, not having the opportunity to fertilize an egg. Gender is indefinite. Sex is neither arousing or mechanical. It is presented as filling the space in between. Another common thread in each of her films on this particular DVD is how average-looking the actors are. If an actor has wrinkles or zits, these "flaws" are evident on film. Hair is permitted to be frizzy or greasy, or both. Imperfection is allowed. The realistic appearance of characters reinforces the natural dialogue and action. The silences and tension between characters is believable, unlike sitcom characters who always have the perfect witty or romantic remark. Sturm's female protagonist in Treehouse seems to enjoy her life of solitude in which male companions are a comfortable distraction rather than point of obsession... her characters do not waste cinema time fretting about being unmarried/unattractive/unattached. Their goals as women appear to be achieving a sense of self-worth through actions entirely independent of men, something one will rarely, if ever, find in popular films or television.