

# UNSPOKEN AND UNSOLVED TELL ME A RIDDLE

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Many socialist theorists and critics in the 20s and 30s recognized the political potential of Hollywood movies: here was a mass medium of the industrial age that could both express social dissatisfaction and entertain notions of a better world. Brecht and Benjamin, amongst others, insisted that politically effective art should be popular, accessible, and pleasurable. Today "materialist" film theorists and critics, ostensibly committed to social change, are still debating the viability of these hopes, and have produced a number of widely differing positions.

The most extreme or "purist" of these positions, championed in particular by a number of feminists, rejects the Hollywood style of Realism and the industry's still largely studio conglomerate control of distribution and exhibition; instead, they look to the "avant-garde" and other alter-native forms of film production, distribution, and exhibition. Realism is rejected as a mystificatory style which seamlessly conceals its formal de-vices in order to invisibly direct viewer response along an ideologically-safe projectile. This position maintains that Hollywood has perpetuated images of women that cater to masculine pleasure. As a result, women have been alternately objectified, fetishized, worshiped, or destroyed, according to the desires/needs of the male spectator. These feminists suggest that women must find new stylistic modes to accommodate feminist im-ages of women. Whether or not one disagrees with the above, one undeniable consequence of the total rejection of Hollywood Realism is the accompanying loss of a large audience—in terms of political effect, a major loss.

Other theorists/critics are more willing to recognize the progressive po-tential of Realist art, however ultimately constrained it may be by the interests in power. This group claims that within certain Realist filmic genres spectator response is not entirely contained and determined. The audience can be distanced from the narrative world through a heightening

of formal/aesthetic elements of style beyond what is necessary to maintain an illusion of reality, in such a manner that thematic elements are foregrounded and parallels between the fictional world and the world outside of the movie theater are strongly suggested. The extreme lighting of film noir or the emotional crescendos of the melodrama and the visual iconography suggesting entrapment are examples (and one can think of numerous others from the musical, the western, the horror film) of this manner of subversion. The melodrama is of particular interest to feminist critics as it was directed to female spectatorship. Films within these genres can be distinguished from those within others which may also employ stylistic extremes in the form of fantastic locales (for example, certain science fiction films, like *Star Wars*, or adventure films, like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*) but fail to suggest that these alternate worlds are in any way related to social reality.<sup>1</sup>

Another area of attention has been the "incoherent" text—a term used to describe films which, while outwardly satisfying the strictures and demands of the political system within which they are produced, remain riddled with contradictions which often work to subvert the films' overt, ideologically-acceptable project. It is often unclear by what mechanisms these subversive impulses manage to erupt within a system which works to contain them: it has generally been more acceptable in the milieu of radical criticism to claim that they surface unintentionally, as censored impulses do in dreams, to the surprise of the dreamer/creator; it is less appropriate to suggest that these messages may also have been intentionally articulated in part or whole, in the films of such male "bourgeois" directors as Ophuls, Sternberg, or Scorsese.

There is a group of films within mainstream narrative art yet to be accounted for. How does one rationalize or explain works which are within the Hollywood aesthetic but which appear to be making no attempt to satisfy any externally-imposed social/aesthetic strictures, which are not particularly noteworthy in terms of stylistic "excess" (in the sense of employing conventions and elements of style as distancing devices), and which seem entirely too conscious and consistent in their raising of political issues to be labelled incoherent?

Aptly named, *Tell Me a Riddle* is one of these films which crop up within a patriarchal/bourgeois film industry. The film is not entirely anomalous, nor is it divorced from the venerable stylistic and generic traditions of Hollywood—but it does signal change and raises issues generally ignored in popular representational art. We would like to suggest that films like *Tell Me a Riddle* reformulate, expand, and evolve generic possibilities by offering different kinds of images than those long perpetuated in mainstream culture. By operating within these parameters, the film neither relinquishes the communicative modes of popular narrative Realist film nor compromises its intentions to communicate fundamental issues of gender/class/ethnicity to a large audience often

deprived of significant images which mirror their experiences. The film attests to the possibility that Hollywood Realist film can both express social criticism and articulate the desire for change, and in so doing, pave the way for such change in the concrete world by affecting consciousness.

The fact that the film was directed by a woman does not entirely account for its elements of difference. We will not elaborate upon Lee Grant's and the production company's difficulties in seeing the project come to fruition. There have been a number of articles on women directors in Hollywood describing their struggles within a very masculine industry and within a society which generally will not risk large sums of money on women (and certainly never on projects as unbankable as this one in terms of subject matter). Clearly the woman's discourse can in part be attributed to Lee Grant's efforts, to Tillie Olsen's novella *Tell Me a Riddle*, and to the input of the feminist collective of Godmother Productions. However just as often, women directors and writers, like women spectators, produce and consume patriarchal discourses without disturbance, having largely come to internalize an image of themselves dictated by a male dominant society. Films about female experience are too often tossed aside by spectators and critics unfamiliar with (or uninterested in) the "Other" side of difference—both in terms of gender experience and class experience. Feminist/socialist critics have placed a high priority on filling in the gaps of experience either suppressed or ignored in our culture, having become aware that the inability to conceptualize change, and to articulate the experiences of Other-ness, has been a major factor in ensuring the maintenance of the status quo.

*Tell Me a Riddle* touches on the kinds of issues, associations, memories, and stories which receive little, if any, attention on the Hollywood screen. The film tells the story of an elderly couple and their struggle to assert differing concepts of their future together. David/Melvin Douglas, the husband, feels overwhelmed by the maintenance needs of their familial home, and by their continual struggle to make ends meet. He wants to spend his remaining years with his friends and co-workers in a retirement home in Florida, called "Union Haven." Eva/Lila Kedrova, the wife, wishes to remain in her house: the familiarity of what was for so many years a place of domestic confinement has ultimately become a source of solace for her, a place of solitude and retreat. As the narrative progresses, it is revealed to all except Eva (ironically, an additional exclusion from the social world) that she is dying of cancer. As a result, David sells their house without Eva's knowledge or consent in order to finance their final journey together so that Eva may see, and unwittingly say farewell to, their various children and grandchildren. The journey assumes a metaphoric resonance as well, as Eva and David confront their walls of resentment and move towards an understanding based on the equal consideration of their mutual needs.

One can already note the differences in the issues the film investigates from those otherwise treated in popular mainstream culture. Not since

the 1937 McCarey film, *Make Way for Tomorrow*, has Hollywood released a serious dramatic film concerning the needs and desires of the elderly coupled with the reality of borderline poverty.<sup>2</sup> In neither film are the hero and heroine typical figures of identification, being neither young nor particularly sexually attractive in the conventional sense. Yet *Tell Me a Riddle* does not stop there. In it, both Eva and David reminisce about their youthful ideals in the Socialist movement in both Russia and America. Although the film's allusions to their Socialist allegiances are quite subtle, there are enough clear references made to establish their ideological history. Not only are these central protagonists elderly, poor, and vaguely socialist, they are also Russian Jewish immigrants, an additional element of "Otherness." Although the film is about both Eva and David, the central character investigated in the narrative, the more problematic protagonist, is Eva; and part of this problematic, aside from the issue of her illness (which is never exploited as it is in other Hollywood movies dealing with fatal illnesses<sup>3</sup>), is her exclusion from active participation in the masculine world of intellectual activity and social politics, and her entrapment in the confined sphere of what society deems the feminine.

This theme of exclusion, along with that of entrapment, links the concerns of *Tell Me a Riddle* with those of the melodrama (referring here to both the literary and cinematic traditions). The problematic of the melodrama includes the expression of women's resistance to their confined and subordinated positions in a male-dominated world. This "expression of resistance," whether conscious or unconscious, takes many forms. One of the most celebrated in the melodrama is that of rebellion through adultery (whether consummated or wished for) as in quintessential melodramas such as *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*. Another manifestation of resistance to the inequalities inherent in the gender-determined division of labor is the heroine's withdrawal: "For them, inwardness alone provides transcendence, and their world within has heroic dimensions."<sup>4</sup> In order to protest their exclusion, these heroines often withdraw into a world which, ironically, increases their isolation and oppression.

In *Tell Me a Riddle*, Eva protests her exclusion by moving inward—not into an interior world of romantic obsession in the more conventional sense of the genre, but into an "adulterous" relationship with her memories, her "friends" (her books and photographs), the remnants of the world she has lost access to. The film avoids equating the male protagonist with patriarchy: as in many of the most significant melodramas, her husband David is a victim of the same social system which oppresses Eva. In the words of Tillie Olsen's novella, ". . . he remembered she had not always been isolated, had not always wanted to live alone . . . But again he could reconstruct, image, nothing of what had been before, or when, or how, it had changed."<sup>5</sup>

The battle the film describes is not easily reduced to male versus female, husband versus wife, but elaborates itself against the larger social back-

ground of the gender-determined division of labor, and economic inequality. As suggested in the novella's opening (" . . . How deep back the stubborn, gnarled roots of the quarrel reached, no one could say"), the quarrel is rooted in the fundamentals of gender and class.

As much as the film encourages one to identify and empathize with Eva (we see her memories, her associations and no one else's), she is simultaneously portrayed as a victim of her own oppression.<sup>6</sup> Although one hasn't yet met Eva, the opening images of the film—photographs from her past—align one with her sphere. As one sees these photographs—some of a man with a young girl (likely Eva), images of Eva as a young woman with her comrades—one hears the sounds of a child humming, some instrumental Russian folk music, and a voice calling "Eva!" These images are followed by pictures of immigrants coming to America (to the sound of boat whistles) and a photo of Eva as a young mother. This collage from the past ends with an abrupt cut to the present: elderly feet moving along a porch, followed by images of a woman's domestic labor—laundry, vacuuming. A man is seen walking across a railway yard, slowly negotiating the steep front stairs of a large house. David's voice asks, "What do we need all this for? Seven rooms . . .", while Eva puts on her scratchy Russian records at a high volume (to both hear and close out) and proceeds to examine her photo album—images of Gorky, Hugo, Voltaire, Chekhov—and is visibly content. The image cuts to David trying to climb a ladder; a low-angle shot from David's point of view makes the ladder seem endless. He knocks on the window of the porch where Eva is sitting, enclosed within the panes of glass (a common visual motif of entrapment within the melodrama, of which Max Ophuls, for example, makes use). "I'm too old for this," he proclaims. "It's a sinking ship." Eva's response is to close the door, to further enclose herself within her own space. "My books are my friends," she tells herself, and the scene cuts to the film's actual flashbacks: images of Eva and another young woman reading in the woods. Eva's reverie is interrupted by David's "Where is my TV guide? . . . anyway, I'm selling the house." Eva moves towards the TV, blocking the screen, as she proclaims, "You cannot sell this house." (Throughout the scene one hears bits of the soundtrack of the TV documentary David has been watching: in reference to "female rhinos and their young cubs," the announcer comments, "Roger is eager to see how they adapt to their temporary captivity.") The oppositions in the struggle are laid out: Eva's insistence on remaining in a house in which, although she is visualized as being "captive," she can choose to withdraw to the privacy of her inward world; and David's wish to sell a house which he can no longer maintain and in which he feels isolated from both his wife and the outside world.

Eva's insistence hinges on her need to remain in the space familiar to her, however imprisoning. Her memories indicate that she resents her imprisonment. Later, on the night described above, David's request to turn out the light is linked to a cut to Eva's memory of a young man (presumably

David) gently touching Eva, as a young woman, as she reads in bed. His soft words ("Don't read, not now") pull her away from her books to the opposing world of children—sexual relations, without birth control, almost inevitably result in babies and therefore further exclusion, and endless circularity which isolates Eva from her own needs relating to the outside world as represented in her books. Eva resents the steady consumption of her time, her need to relax, and insists on using the present to indulge in the past she has lost. David resents Eva's introversion ("Are you on or off?" he continually asks, in reference to the hearing aid which she frequently turns off, shutting him out), just as Eva has always resented his connections to the world outside—his card games, his leisure to joke and entertain. Eva never has experienced the leisure afforded men; as she tells her grandchildren, she knows no riddles—it seems she has never had the time for anything beyond immediate and pressing domestic demands.

During a family dinner, Eva defends her wish to remain in the house by telling her family, "I can't live with people anymore." "But Mama," her daughter protests, "you've lived your whole life for people." "Not with . . . many different things now." "Then live alone!" David retorts. This is a constant battle reiterated throughout. In Olsen's words, "She would not exchange her solitude for anything. Never again to be forced to move to the rhythms of others. For in this solitude she had won to a reconciled peace."

When visiting her youngest daughter Vivi, Eva turns away from holding her newborn grandchild. "I can't," she protests. The moment is followed by memories of herself as a young mother lying in bed, her husband's arms holding out a baby while she turns her face away, resentful, refusing. The following shot is of Eva nursing, but instead of offering the archetypical image of joyous sustenance, the feeling is one of being drained, of having demands imposed which are resented. Again, in Olsen's words, "A new baby. How many warm, seductive babies . . . warm flesh like this that had claims and nuzzled away all else and with lovely mouths devoured. . . ." Eva cannot listen to her children reminiscing of her duties as a mother—the food she cooked, the dresses she sewed: "Too much past, Vivi. I just don't remember." She doesn't want to remember.

Painful memories are evoked for Eva as she watches her grandson playing atop a "jungle gym": we see flashback images of Cossack guards outside of the jail cell in which she and another woman are being held. The sequence continues, intercutting between Eva lying in bed remembering and the flashbacks which culminate in the image of her friend, Lisa, hanging. Eva wakes up in a sweat and David soothes: "No prison, Omaha." Still in Omaha, Eva again relives her prison experience in a sequence which ends with her granddaughter discovering her huddled in a closet: "Are you hiding here too, Grandma?" Eva's memories of her imprisonment in the "old country" as a result of political oppression (due either to her socialist activities or her status as a Jew or perhaps both) constantly in-

terrupt her feeling of oppression and entrapment in the "new world" resulting from her role as mother combined with her battle to feed and clothe her children. Eva never stops reliving her prison experience as long as she still feels imprisoned, isolated, and ghettoized by the demands of domestic and reproductive labor. In describing the divisions of working class along gender lines in the Soviet Union, Varda Burstyn comments: "imploding discontent and alienation prevents the full demonstration of resistance."<sup>7</sup> This concept can be applied to women's feelings of alienation in any society. *Implosion* prevents resistance and leads to internal breakdown. In Andrew Britton's article on Ophuls's melodrama, *Madame De . . .*, he discusses the illness of the central protagonist, Louise. Patronizingly indulged at first, "her illness becomes a metaphor for the systematic impoverishment and curtailment of emotional resources and allegiances produced by Louise's oppression."<sup>8</sup> One can similarly read Eva's degenerative illness as a manifestation of her body succumbing to stress and physical exploitation. Following Eva's initial visit to the doctor, before the results revealing the gravity of Eva's illness have come in, her daughter-in-law reprovingly reports to David that Eva was told to "start living like a human being." Her family cannot understand that Eva has never been afforded that luxury.

The "gnarled roots of the quarrel" between David and Eva originate in the sexual division of labor and economic/class divisions, the interconnectedness of which the film insists upon throughout. Both Eva and David were Jewish socialists, active in the Russian revolution, or at least in the task of raising political consciousness against oppression in Russia. The film goes on to suggest that these ideals followed them to America. David talks of organizing the Union Haven retirement home and later comments that Eva has him "organizing again"—advocating rent controls in their friend, Mrs. Mays's, apartment building. Eva's contemporary experience of racial/class oppression in San Francisco is evident in scenes in which she walks past Chilean murals commemorating freedom and independence. These murals recall her memories of past oppression. David and Eva's economic struggles are stressed throughout: Eva's fight to feed and clothe their family during the depression; the humiliation of having to scrounge for day-old bread and soup bones; their recent struggles to keep up their house and finally now, the pressures of meeting medical expenses and the cost of the visits to their children.

Perhaps the clearest indication of gender and economic oppression, coupled with the oppression of the elderly in a youth-oriented society, is embodied in the plight of Mrs. Mays/Lili Valenty, the old friend Eva rediscovers in San Francisco. Her husband has passed away, her family has grown up and she is no longer socially relevant. The first shot of Mrs. Mays—rifling through trash bins in the background of the image—arouses middle-class sentiments of pity mixed with indifference and perhaps mild disgust. Lee Grant brilliantly foregrounds the prejudices informing this

response by immediately transforming the anonymous "bag lady" into an important character in the remaining narrative. The sequence in which Mrs. Mays invites David and Eva home for tea is startling in its explicit critique of the exploitation of the elderly. She describes her apartment as being near "where they show the porno movies." As Eva and David approach Mrs. Mays's apartment, she apologizes for the elevator being out of order. As they breathlessly "rest and climb" to the top, she admits that it is always out of order. She mentions the rent hikes due to minor "renovations" and goes on to explain that the cans she collects earn her 21¢ a pound, "nothing to sniff at." As her fridge has broken down, she explains that she treats herself to 65¢ meals at the "Center," although "the food's not good." As she excuses herself to go to the washroom down the hall, Eva nearly collapses, unable to breathe, sputtering, ". . . a lifetime of rooms . . . now only one room . . . no room . . . can't talk . . . eight children and now only one room."

Images of old age, poverty, and neglect connected to an elderly female are the realization of all of Eva's fears: after years of devoted domestic labor (eight children) and isolation from the social world of production (Mrs. Mays's husband died of a heart attack; hence she is no longer connected to that world), women are neglected, shut away in apartments like these, collecting reusable refuse. The entire Mrs. Mays sequence is one which underlines the film's thematic of constriction, confinement, airlessness. One might describe the film as being structured around the movement from the vocal, active past through the airless, repressed present towards the future—marked by the moments in which Eva rediscovers her "voice" and can reciprocate again in her relationships with David, with Jeannie, her granddaughter, and with her friend, Mrs. Mays. The motif of airlessness and suffocation is linked with spatial confinement throughout. Near the beginning of the film, when Eva and David are still in their own home, David wakes up in the middle of the night and finds Eva outside during a rainstorm, ecstatically singing an old Russian love song. "David, I can breathe now, my lungs are filled with air." Mrs. Mays's room, which reminds Eva of a coffin, re-evokes her fear of being unable to breathe, of imprisonment.

The sequences in San Francisco mark a significant turning point in Eva's life. She develops two important relationships (primarily one with Jeannie/Brooke Adams, but also with Mrs. Mays), and she begins to emerge from her inner space into the outside world. The transition is marked by her increasing ability to vocalize her sentiments and to confront and share elements of her past which she has secretly guarded. This transition is visualized by a use of space which is open and unrestrictive: Jeannie's airy loft, walks along the Pacific, and picnics by the sea. One day, while walking with David, Eva rushes through an arched passageway (the walls of which are sprayed with the graffiti message: "Smash Racism"), kicks off her shoes, and frolics in the wide open Pacific. In another scene, Eva,

Mrs. Mays, and Jeannie are having a picnic in the sunshine by the sea. Jeannie is rollerskating, an activity which subtly underlines her mobility, her freedom, her positive outlook. It is the first time that Eva is heard openly and willingly describing her past: "So I said to my father, why can't I go to school? My brothers go to school . . . I lived with my father, a man of God. He said, 'A woman is a footstool for a man.' So I run to Lisa and she teaches me how to read." Jeannie proceeds to share the news of her break-up with the man she has been living with and ends up proclaiming, "I'm gonna live! Here I am! I survived!" The sequence beautifully illustrates the growing support these women offer one another. In later sequences Jeannie and Mrs. Mays are seen massaging and comforting Eva through her illness. On another occasion at the seashore with Jeannie, Eva says, "To think what is beyond . . . Korea, China . . . Geography, I could just eat it up." These moments are significant in the way they reflect Eva's renewed interest in the world outside of the domestic realm.

One can discern two clearly-related narratives in the film, the turning point of each beginning when David regretfully confesses he has sold their house. One narrative line entails the conflict over the sale of the house marked by Eva's desire to return to her home and her inability to do so; the more profound narrative line involves Eva's emergence from confinement into relative freedom prior to her death. Ironically, what seems a loss in the more overt narrative (that of the sale of the house) turns out to be an important victory in the more general struggle. Eva learns that her home is not equivalent to her domestic/familial house, and that the moments of satisfaction she previously enjoyed inwardly can now be shared with and passed on to others.

The sequence following David's revelation of having sold the house is one of attempted reconciliation. On the eve of Mrs. Mays's birthday party, David offers Eva a flower which she outwardly rejects, then sniffs appreciatively. Eva asserts her desire to attend the party even though she is feverish. The party reawakens images of her past. The master of ceremonies/accordionist dedicates some songs to the Jewish-Russian immigrants, victims of "pogroms" (anti-Semitic attacks). He begins to dance with Eva, wheeling her in her chair. The familiar music transports her back to Olshana, her hometown, where she sees herself (in intercut flashbacks) as a child, dancing to these same tunes. As the politically-evocative music continues, Eva suddenly stops, attempts to get up, and cries out, "Freiheit! Freiheit!" The scene cuts to Eva's memory of herself, clasping her friend/comrade's hands, delivering a rousing speech ending with these cries for freedom, but in her present, older voice. The moment in which Eva shouts "freedom" signifies an important change—the world remembered finally breaks through to the present. Eva's assertions of freedom overwhelm her earlier memories of imprisonment. She no longer represses her demands to be politically/socially active and her voice rings out in strength. It is not suggested as an "embarrassing incident" for either Eva

or David. The scene following, in Jeannie's apartment, continues their mutual outpouring of much which has been withheld for so long. As Eva and David share a cup of tea, their reconciliation continues. David offers to have Eva's books sent and Eva replies, "I don't need them . . . it's all here" (pointing to her head). She continues by suggesting that David should go to Union Haven: "You have a right to your own life," and David counters, "What about me? Alone without you, you always leave me." "How do I leave you?" "You shut off your hearing. You go inside you. Back to Olshana. To your books. Books, books, always your books. I don't know how I'd bear it without my comrade. My enemy. My girl. You're the only one who knew me when I was a boy. . . ." At this point, Eva, murmuring his name, approaches David. The scene cuts back to the recurring images of Eva's memory of herself as a young woman reading in bed, approached by her husband who whispers "Not now" as he closes her book. It is a flashback the audience has seen a number of times by this point; however, the earlier references all suggested Eva's resentment, in the sense of her lack of time to read, and the inevitable babies that compounded this lack. This time, though, the flashback continues, intercut with the older Eva as initiator, approaching David, comforting, touching and embracing him. They continue their caress during a long take. The image cuts back and forth between the older couple and their youthful counterparts caressing, bridging over time with an embrace.

This sequence, laden with resonances rarely captured on the Hollywood screen, is one of extraordinary beauty. The completion of the embrace has an enormous impact on a number of levels simultaneously: it separates Eva's sexual pleasure from the earlier scenes indicating her resentment of the difficulties of caring for the babies that followed; it visualizes Eva's emergence from behind the walls within which she has enclosed herself; it indicates David's needs—his feelings of loss and abandonment by, not the wife/mother, but rather his comrade; and it severs social taboos against depicting the elderly as sensual beings (instead of the more usual association of sexuality with age in the form of lewd satire of such "abnormal" behavior).

The film never suggests that Eva is cured, either spiritually or physically, or that husband and wife can now continue together without any obstacles and that some permanent order can be imposed. Besides the fact that the "roots" run deep, the film has continuously laid the framework of the conflict against the larger complex of social systems that oppress people, often without their realization or consciousness. Eva's fears and anxieties are still threatening to her and continue to erupt: fears of the "goy gasse" ("street of gentiles"—probable sites for pogroms)—"No streets like that," David comforts. "No ghetto?" "No ghetto"; flashback images seen during the delirium of the final stages of Eva's illness, of Eva pregnant with their son Arnie (who was killed in Korea), hanging laundry, begging for a quarter

to buy day-old bread; fears of being pursued; fleeing and losing her ability to run.

The final movement of the film is towards Eva's inevitable death; however, the narrative does not equate death with defeat. In fact, one might argue that the film not only confronts but celebrates death (transgressing another taboo in a society scrupulously devoted to denying age and death) through Jeannie's inheritance of the principles her grandmother has lived for and perhaps died for.<sup>9</sup> Part of the significance of *Tell Me a Riddle* resides in its reminder that women's struggles for liberation were not invented in the 70s or even in the Suffragettes' fight for the vote in the early part of this century in the liberal democracies of Britain or America. The film links Eva's struggles in the Socialist movement to concerns that the relatively emancipated Jeannie must still confront. Eva empathizes with Jeannie in her anguish over having had an abortion (a narrative element the film inserts which is absent from the novella): "How could I have another baby I couldn't feed? I know about abortion." Leafing through her book of photographs with Jeannie, Eva introduces Jeannie to her comrade, Lisa, "the one who taught me how to read and how to fight," and to various individuals, mainly writers, telling her, "These people will sustain you," thereby effectively passing on to her granddaughter these sources of sustenance. Jeannie helps Eva regain access to the world around her, through Tai Chi, through the Rosita doll which emblemizes the memory of a child's life, and above all through her companionship (as Jeannie rightly advised Eva upon their first meeting, "I'm a big strong girl. Lean on me, Grandma.").

As in all Realist art, the final images work towards "closure"—the narrative elements are tied together in an attempt to answer and reconcile the problematic set out at the beginning. However, *Tell Me a Riddle* offers these pleasures of the narrative without restoring the order that was. Eva does not get her house back but then, she has learned to live beyond its walls. As David examines a sketch Jeannie has made of him and Eva curled up, asleep together in her bed, he offers his eulogy of the woman he loved and respected: "You don't know . . . how she was . . . so eloquent . . . a beautiful young girl surrounded by all those people in the woods . . . all those years, she kept those speeches inside. . . ." Unlike so many of the melodramas which end with the heroine's death, Eva's does not leave one paralyzed, immobile, in despair. The film is committed to rekindling those speeches: "She wants to pass it on," Jeannie explains, as does the film, in a most eloquent, communicable manner, and in this way redefines the limits of the genre of the melodrama.

*Tell Me a Riddle* utilizes the accessible, pleasurable modes of popular narrative art to articulate the most fundamental experiences of sex, gender, and class. By representing a woman's dreams, fears, and memories, the film begins to fill a huge vacuum in mainstream representation. As femi-

nists have theorized, these seemingly small personal experiences are profoundly political. By exposing images, voices, and narratives long suppressed and silenced, the film reformulates and stretches the possibilities of expression within a language familiar to the viewing audience, attesting to the possibility of producing art which is both popular and politically significant.

#### NOTES

1. See Andrew Britton's article in *Movie* 31/32, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment," and Robin Wood's article "'80s Hollywood: Dominant Tendencies" in *Cine-Action!* 1, Spring 1985, pp. 2-6 for an elaboration of these ideas.

2. *Harry and Tonto* (1974) and *Going in Style* (1979) do address some of these issues, although more within the conventions of comedy.

3. Compare, for instance, *Terms of Endearment* (1983).

4. Andrew Britton quotes from James Walton's "Caleb Williams and the Novel Form" (*Salzburg Studies in English Literature* No. 47, Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1975) in "Mimesis and Metaphor in *Madame de*", *Movie* 29/30, p. 104.

5. Olsen, Tillie, *Tell Me a Riddle* (London: Faber and Faber), p. 21.

6. In Britton's article cited in footnote 4, he makes the same argument in reference to Louise, the protagonist in Ophuls's melodrama, *Madame de*. He discusses the spectator's inability to condone her "morbid withdrawal into romantic despair" (p. 107).

7. Burstyn, Varda, "Masculine Dominance and the State" (*The Socialist Register*, 1983, pp. 45-89), p. 71.

8. Britton, Andrew, op. cit., p. 107.

9. It is interesting to note that the film greatly elaborates on the character of Jeannie as she is depicted in the novella, in order to stress this continuance.