

## Report: Reframing the Montreal Massacre: Strategies for Feminist Media Activism

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*Abstract:* In the days that followed the Montréal Massacre at the École Polytechnique, December 6, 1989, the Canadian mass media became a discursive battleground regarding violence against women. In response to this phenomenon, I released a half-hour documentary in 1995 entitled *Reframing the Montreal Massacre: A Media Interrogation*. Designed as a feminist tool for media literacy, the tape deconstructs six key moments in the media coverage of the Massacre. This paper serves as an extended artist's statement to accompany the project's re-release on the Internet, while simultaneously exploring aesthetic and representational strategies that shape the documentary.

*Résumé :* Dans les jours qui ont suivi le massacre de l'École Polytechnique de Montréal, le 6 décembre 1989, la presse canadienne devint un champ de bataille discursif relativement à la violence orientée contre les femmes. En réponse à ce phénomène, j'ai réalisé en 1995 un documentaire d'une demi-heure intitulé *Reframing the Montreal Massacre: A Media Interrogation*. Conçu comme un outil féministe en faveur de l'information médiatique, le documentaire déconstruit six moments clés de la couverture médiatique du massacre. À l'occasion de la rediffusion du projet sur Internet, le présent article réitère dans sa continuité ma prise de position en tant qu'artiste, explorant simultanément les stratégies esthétiques et représentationnelles qui modèlent le documentaire.

*Keywords:* Montreal massacre, Feminist media literacy, Canadian documentary, Canadian video art, Experimental documentary

Shortly after 5:00 p.m. on the evening of December 6, 1989, a lone gunman began a shooting spree inside the Université de Montréal's École Polytechnique, Canada's largest engineering program. His attacks began in a mechanical engineering classroom, where he separated the men from the women and, before gunning down nine female students, declared, "You're all a bunch of feminists—I hate feminists." Twenty minutes later, after killing 14 women and injuring 13 other students and staff members (including a number of men), he turned the gun on himself. His suicide note listed over a dozen other prominent québécoise women he intended to assassinate because he saw them as "radical feminists"—

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the group he blamed for his lack of success in life. Marc Lépine (born Gamil Gharbi) had been turned away from both the Canadian Armed Forces and the École Polytechnique.

After the shootings of December 6, 1989, the Canadian mass media became a discursive battleground for issues of violence against women. Asked to comment on the Massacre in the media, many prominent Canadian feminists insisted these murders were an extreme example of the violence against women already prevalent in the lives of too many Canadians (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1989). When journalists challenged these claims and other “expert” witnesses disagreed with feminist claims regarding violence against women, focus shifted away from the event itself.

Shortly after the 1989 Massacre, I decided to chronicle the media coverage of this tragedy by charting out and unpacking the shifting terrain of post-Massacre signification regarding gendered violence. The mediation of any news event is how we experience such moments of “reality,” since few of us have direct experience of these events. As such, in planning this documentary, I limited my frame to media coverage of the event rather than returning to primary research material—eyewitness accounts and stories from inside the École Polytechnique. Canadian media outlets had already exhausted such investigations. Print and TV news then—my own experience of the event—became my primary source.

*Reframing the Montreal Massacre* examines six specific media moments in the aftermath of the shootings in individual segments: “Revisiting Barbara Frum,” “Award-Winning Photo,” “No Place for Anger,” “What’s in a Frame?” “Playing the Victim Game,” and “A Silent Goodbye.” Each short three- to five-minute segment offers a subjective close reading of a media moment, providing viewers with strategic tools for engaging in socially responsible, informed, sceptical news consumption (see Bradley abstract at [www.cjc-online.ca](http://www.cjc-online.ca)).

*Reframing* foregrounds taken-for-granted techniques in news reportage such as visual and verbal branding of events—the graphic or title used to quickly identify a tragedy—or the assumption that there are two sides to a story. News does not erupt in tight little bundles of binary opposition—sometimes there are six sides to a story; sometimes there is only one.<sup>1</sup> By drawing attention to techniques used in constructing news for public consumption, the documentary reminds viewers that news is merely a version of reality.

*Reframing* began as a master’s degree project option, and to my mind it is an example of the potential of producing projects in media studies courses, rather than simply written theses. It was later funded by the *Ministère de la Culture du Québec* and the Canadian Studies Directorate at Canadian Heritage; the project began in Montréal and was completed in Vancouver.<sup>2</sup>

With modest funding in place, locating my source material became a major challenge. Deterred by stories from other artist friends who had attempted to obtain news footage from Montréal broadcasters, I decided to avoid the gatekeeping and exorbitant research fees being charged by local broadcasters. Instead, I opted for a more Canadian approach. The National Archives of Canada turned out to be more neutral and helpful territory in which to revisit the event. However, the scope of the Archive holdings did present one drawback. While the Archives con-

tained French- and English-language newspapers from across the country, the only news footage in the collection from 1989 was national broadcasts on the two main English networks.

What initially felt like a lack turned into an asset as I began writing the voice-over. First, I realized the Archive's English-only news-footage holdings reflected my Anglo-Montréal experience. Second, by comparing the national news footage with my memories of the local news, I discovered a poignant focus for one key argument—that feminist anger was suppressed in mainstream news media. When I realized the tone of regional Montréal news differed considerably from the national broadcasts I found in the Ottawa archives, it became clear that national coverage was sanitized by omitting footage of an angry confrontation between Montréal feminists and male students from the Université de Montréal that ran in local news on December 7, 1989. On the night after Lépine yelled that he hated feminists while gunning down women, the national networks kept Montréal feminists silent.

In the segment “No Place for Anger,” I discuss the discrepancy between local and national reports. Perhaps the national editors did not see this angry *melee* as newsworthy. But based on an analysis of two weeks of national news, I suggest that this choice was more deliberate—that news reports on December 7th started a subtle practice of social gatekeeping regarding the Massacre. This moment seemed to be the first instance in the Massacre aftermath where network producers and journalists implicitly dictated acceptable responses to the Montréal Massacre. The same debate erupted at Massacre commemorations for many years—many saw anger as an unsuitable and disrespectful response to the event.

While I see *Reframing* as a project in media literacy, aesthetically, I categorize the work as an experimental documentary.<sup>3</sup> “Avant-garde” seems both too outdated and esoteric a moniker for a project intended primarily as activist in scope. By “experimental,” I mean it employs a non-normative aesthetic, breaking the traditions and constraints of institutional, broadcast, and commercial non-fiction film. This aesthetic approach, as chronicled by Peter Steven (1993), can be traced through the work of many contemporary Canadian media-artists with roots in the artist-run-centre system as opposed to the NFB or journalism traditions. Many Canadian video artists, in particular, excel at this mode of address—for example, Richard Fung, Jayce Salloum, and Wendy Oberlander. A more recent example can be seen in Velcrow Ripper's feature documentary *Scared Sacred* (Ripper, 2004).

The tape was shot on Hi8 and Super 8 using VHS source material, and it was mastered and edited on Beta SP at Video In Studios and the karaoke production company I worked for at the time. After spending long shifts editing karaoke videos, I worked on *Reframing the Montreal Massacre* after-hours in the Beta SP online linear suite at now-defunct Studio Une Productions. Production of the tape also took place at Video In and Studio Une, though much of the content was created through post-production techniques available in the pre-DV/non-linear days of Beta SP online linear editing. Borrowing from the video-art address of my earlier work,<sup>4</sup> I massaged and re-shot media footage, sometimes distorting and manipulating the material to create a sense of visual abstraction and self-reflexiv-

ity. I inserted images of myself editing the documentary into the work, reminding viewers through on-screen text: "Don't forget, I am manipulating images too." Because of the visual abstraction, I always returned to iconic images and familiar referents to ground the viewing experience and tie it to the aural narrative.

These strategies speak to and deconstruct the process of mediation by foregrounding the frame, the televisual screen, and the grain of the video and print text. The voice-over binds the entire piece through a non-linear narrative of sorts, giving the viewer tools to read media more critically. Video and audio elements fuse together an essayistic series of video poems that translates well into the non-linear format of the new online version on the *Canadian Journal of Communication* website. In a sense, the single-channel distribution of the original tape forces a fixed linearity to the discussion, diverging from the multiplicity of overlapping readings we experience as consumers of news and public affairs. Viewers/users may be better served by this new exploration of the event through a user-determined circular or non-linear Web-based path.

I have attended roughly a dozen screenings of *Reframing the Montreal Massacre* over the past decade. The tape is still used by a number of women's studies programs and gender studies, media studies, and engineering classes, and it is used by women's centres across the country to commemorate the tragedy. Apart from a few viewers who insisted my work was anti-male, feedback has been enormously positive.

Two reactions stick out.

The documentary first screened at a fundraiser for the Women's Monument Project, *Marker for Change*, in Vancouver in 1995. *Marker for Change* was unveiled in 1997 in East Vancouver and faced its own anti-feminist backlash from right-wing media. The Women's Monument Project hosted a film screening at the Pacific Cinémathèque to raise funds for and awareness of the project. Attending the screening was Suzanne Laplante-Edward, founder of the December 6 Victims Foundation and mother of Anne-Marie Edward, one of the 14 women murdered on December 6, 1989. I found Laplante-Edward's presence both inspiring and unnerving. She had been touring Canada for a number of years speaking about violence against women and gun control. My main concern involved a photo of one of the slain women, featured prominently in a section of the documentary, "Award-Winning Photo." Was this Laplante-Edward's daughter?

To my surprise, Laplante-Edward was not concerned about the photo at all, but she did reprimand me for my treatment of CBC icon Barbara Frum (another perspective for which I expected to take flak). As I began planning *Reframing*, Frum died unexpectedly. I was left to wonder if critiquing this Canadian broadcasting giant was in good taste. Upon re-screening the December 7, 1989, edition of CBC's *The Journal*, I decided to stay on course, as Frum's public denial of the misogynist nature of this tragedy was shocking to me, as it was to thousands of Canadians. Though I had only seen Frum's infamous interview once before visiting the National Archives to re-screen it, that first viewing had such a profound impact on me that it was, in retrospect, one of the main impetuses behind creating this documentary. So what was Mme. Laplante-Edward's reaction? The photo, which she had seen countless times, was not the issue; she insisted I was too easy on Frum.

The second reaction that stands out dates back to a Winnipeg screening in 1996. A woman from the audience did take issue with the abovementioned photo. She insisted that by showing the photo throughout one segment of the documentary, I was relying on pornographic strategies. Apart from the critiques of *Reframing* as anti-male, my use of this photo provoked the only critical feedback I have received about the documentary.

The section of the documentary that contains the photo, “Award-Winning Photo,” is one of the longest segments of the video and the one I struggled with most during my long nights of editing at Studio Une. Much of my critique of this photo involved context more than content. Showing a dead woman slumped over in a chair in the cafeteria of the École Polytechnique, it ran the morning of December 7, 1989, above the fold on page one of *The Montréal Gazette*. Alan McInnis’ award-winning shot was printed three columns wide and ten inches deep in (for the time) extravagant full-colour.

The Winnipeg viewer touched on an issue that I had struggled with for months. How was I to discuss the complex questions raised by the publication of this photo without showing it? My original plan was to use a black screen to accompany the voice-over about the photo. I thought this would make a strong conceptual statement about representational choice. When the voice-over ran four minutes long, this conceptual strategy backfired and (feminist) test audiences urged me to change my tactic. People wanted to see the photo; they wanted to judge for themselves, thus suggesting that context is critical to the discussion. The original context that concerned me involved *The Gazette’s* decision to run the photo on the front page less than 24 hours after the shooting. Like Barbara Frum’s ruthless anti-female statements on *The Journal*, seeing the *Gazette* photo on the morning of December 7 felt like another assault—another turn of the knife.

Though I relate with the Winnipeg viewer and we share similar concerns, I am also aware that she chose to attend a screening of *Reframing the Montreal Massacre* in 1996 knowing the context and content of the video. By contrast, that Thursday morning of December 7, 1989, Montréalers could not escape the photo. In the end, my strategy with “Award-Winning Photo” was to show the picture briefly but to avoid pausing long enough on the image of the dead woman to allow for recognition. The camera kept moving, isolating different elements of the frame. When returning to the photo, at times I chose to pixelate and distort it in part or in whole, and I relied on budget-wise supplementary footage of arty re-enactments to flesh out the segment. In the end, I am still unsatisfied with “Award-Winning Photo,” though many non-Montréalers who had never seen the photo previously insist that seeing it is critical to any discussion of the subject.

One other topic I did not have time to discuss in *Reframing* is the use of the word “massacre” to describe this tragedy. I was originally torn about using this word in the documentary but decided that other more critical issues needed to be deconstructed in the video. Though the documentary explores the notion of visual branding in news, I did not venture into deconstructing verbal branding of tragedies. The visual branding of the Montréal Massacre is deconstructed in the segment “What’s in a Frame,” which draws attention to the selective use of rifles (in week one post-Massacre) and candles (in week two post-Massacre) to signify

the Massacre in TV news. Moments after any news story or tragedy occurs, news graphic departments quickly assemble and create recognizable iconic images to cue viewers. These graphics typically hover over the anchorperson's right shoulder and become shorthand for the event. Unintentionally, they may underscore our cultural values and beliefs. Sometimes they are *verbatim* propaganda—"The War on Terror." These intense condensations of signification typically change and evolve as networks receive feedback from viewers, reporters, and editors regarding the shifting discursive terrain of a tragedy.

Watching the evolution of branding and "handling" of news events is a fascinating spectator sport that speaks to hegemony in action. It often takes a day or more before networks and the public settle on a handle. Watching CNN or Newsworld in the hours following tragedies (think of Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, the Challenger Explosion), we can chart the process of branding, the creation of handles, and the ideological stain therein. Similarly, tragedies often take on a title or a handle like "The Montréal Massacre." The initial reason is quick recognition, but fascinating choices go into creating such handles, calling attention to how network producers decide what is in the frame and what is left out. Like iconic brands, news handles require selection. For example, though the killing of those 14 women could arguably have been called "The Misogynist Massacre," it was not.

Why hesitate to use the word "massacre"? Recently, I have heard the Air India bombing described as "the worst mass murder in Canadian history"—the exact words I used in *Reframing*. Perhaps in 1989, the Canadian media and public did not remember Air India as a Canadian tragedy. As a result, the Montréal shootings held the title until recent revisioning. Similarly, some critics in 1989 suggested First Nations in Canada have experienced many massacres since first contact and could likely claim the word.

In the years following the Massacre, I watched the changing reaction and coverage through yearly commemorations and noticed a shift each year in how questions of violence against women evolved in public discourse. In the days that followed the Massacre, questions were raised repeatedly in news media—were Lepine's actions an extreme example of gendered violence already prevalent in our culture? Did a problem of violence against women exist in Canada? Was this an isolated incident or the tip of the iceberg? Perhaps these questions were raised due to an editorial gender bias, or perhaps they were raised because of the journalistic rubric of so-called balanced reporting. Assuming there are two sides to every story, reporters posed these questions rather than simply accepting claims made by women's groups and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. In a way, the Massacre spurred on the official proof—in 1991, the federal government established the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, a scaled-down Royal Commission, and declared December 6 Canada's National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women.

Revisiting *Reframing the Montreal Massacre*, we can see representations of gender and violence come into sharp relief. Gazing back allows us to watch a hegemonic shift in progress, as taken-for-granted notions of gender and culture evolve in Canadian news media. Reflecting on my own choices in constructing this documentary, I am struck by the somewhat naïve faith I had in the CBC—per-

haps I assumed that our national broadcaster would rise to a higher standard of political engagement than private broadcasters. In retrospect, I see how the CBC has shifted its own discourse about gendered violence since the Massacre. In fact, the CBC/RDI has the only widely accessible public archive of the Montréal Massacre coverage, including free, comprehensive educational tools for teachers (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.; Société Radio-Canada, n.d.). What remain challenges for those interested in developing strategies for feminist media activism are issues of copyright and distribution. These were the other lessons learned from this project.

In choosing to acquire my footage through the National Archives, I side-stepped sanctioned (and costly) use of CBC and CTV footage. Instead I opted to follow “fair use” provisions under the Canadian *Copyright Act*. Such provisions allow for educational use of copyrighted material. Through various aesthetic techniques, I manipulated my source footage extensively, also with the Canadian *Copyright Act* in mind. Copyrighted material manipulated for artistic purposes is another grey zone in the evolving domain of copyright law. To date, there is no Canadian precedent-setting case in these areas of “fair use.” As a result, WTN (now W Network) changed its mind about purchasing the documentary, despite the fact that it wanted to broadcast it. It simply could not afford the risk of being sued by CTV or CBC.

In 1995, I made the fateful choice to distribute the video with Full Frame Distribution (previously DEC) in Toronto. Full Frame went bankrupt. Sadly, the tape also sat in limbo for a number of years. To the company’s credit, it did attempt to obtain clearance rights from CTV and CBC. However, licence fees for the footage were more than triple the budget of the entire production and 20 times the licence fee WTN could likely offer. I would also have had to negotiate dense contracts with ACTRA for residual royalties for the national news anchormen. Knowing the documentary would likely never yield a profit, this process seemed punitive and a waste of time.

The experience ignited a curiosity in me about ownership of tragedy imagery and issues of privilege raised in the process. In such situations, privacy often has a steep price tag. And though I recognize CTV as a private broadcaster with legitimate rights to control its archival footage as an asset, I question the issue of ownership of CBC’s vast archive. What rights do we have to access this footage? Further, what does the economic control of these images mean for scholars interested in producing critical media work in formats other than the written text?

Upon discovering the complexities of economic control of public imagery, the project of feminist media literacy seems even more urgent to me. It is often the marginalized who fare the worst in mass media discourse as they/we typically lack the resources and litigious clout to keep public representation in balance. With *Reframing*, I wanted to create an accessible tool for feminist media literacy targeted at both high school and post-secondary audiences. Eschewing aesthetic conventions of traditional broadcast documentary, I hoped to create a visually stimulating and fast-moving piece that would grab the attention of the Much Music generation.

In the years that followed the Massacre and the making of this documentary,

my reaction was consistent: anger. My anger was not about the shootings, but about the backlash perpetuated within the media. Looking back, I now see a change in my attitude.

Since the Massacre, I also have seen a shift in the attitudes of young men, from the men I studied with to the ones I now teach. The chilly climate in the classroom has thawed somewhat. It is heartening to see that, in the last 17 years, media literacy has expanded with the proliferation of digital dissemination. As savvy global viewers, fewer citizens take what they see in the news as fact. Yet what fascinates me most about this project is its relevance today—these texts still prove productive, and reliving these moments provides new insight in the evolving arena of discursive media analysis. As we approach the 20-year anniversary of the Massacre, these lessons remain instructive, as they suggest new questions for today's political climate.

### Notes

1. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *The National/The Journal*, December 7, 1989.
2. See Strutt & Hissey (1992) for a detailed discussion of the discursive flaws of journalistic balance.
3. *Reframing the Montréal Massacre: A Media Interrogation* served as my thesis project for my MA in Media Studies at Concordia University in 1995.
4. Experimental documentary is discussed at length in Peter Steven's (1993) *Brink of Reality: New Canadian Documentary Film and Video*, specifically in relation to a style of art school-influenced social documentary produced in Canada in the 80s and 90s.
5. *Losing It*, 1994; *Not Like That*, 1993; *The Weight of Women's Eyes*; 1993; *Safe Sex Is Hot Sex*, 1990.

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