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**TELLING STORIES : RAYMONDE APRIL'S CHANSONS FORMIDABLES**  
**CHERYL SIMON**



*“...narrative has a different concept than poetry or even exposition, because, you see, the narrative in itself is not what is in your mind but what is in somebody else’s.”<sup>1</sup>*

Raymonde April uses photography to tell stories. In her photographic narratives the protagonist is more often than not Raymonde April.

Entering her work, acting out all positions of the “four image repertoire” of photographic portraiture,<sup>2</sup> April appears simultaneously as herself (namely the person that she believes herself to be); her public self (the subject); the person she as photographer knows; and the object of her artistic endeavour. Thus April effectively controls all aspects of her representation.

For those who perceive only the first two positions of this portrait recital, the experience may be fraught with fears of inauthenticity, passive victimization and the inevitable objectification. But while April’s coup d’état respects this state of vulnerability, her eager and repeated submission to

these processes of photographic objectification reveals a very different concept of “subjectivity.” She sees the “self” as a construct—an elaborate accumulation of roles and identities mirrored by and for, and therefore understood through, an “other.” April accepts objectification as a selfconscious strategy in the process of self-identification. As such her project functions beyond the realm of simple autobiography: it is meta-autobiographic and not specifically concerned with April’s self, but with the self as a common subject of perception.



Since April conceives of the self as a fictional being — this construct of identities seen through the eyes and mind of somebody else — it follows that she should choose a narrative format to describe that self. She has come to understand that autobiography as narrative is necessarily fictional, and that the distancing fundamental to narrative is also essential in the telling of one’s own life story. One must create an other to function as the narrator of this tale, and for April this other is of course herself as photographer.

April uses a montage-type narrative technique to build her persona, honouring the multiplicit, accumulative self that is known through the experience of others rather than the traditional culminative, historically determined self. In April’s project both the physical proximity of seemingly disparate images and her own particular photographic sensibility, giving preference to an ill-defined psychological state over clearly defined action, establish narrative continuity; the

non-synchronous repetition of her subjects and environments serve as character development. For example, when we meet April in *De l'autre côté des baisers* (1985–86, *The Other Side of Kisses*) we find her pictured at different times and in different states—butted up against, framed by, and framing pictures she has taken of her friends. Using her image as counterpoint April builds a persona spatially as opposed to temporally. By “beginning again and again” April establishes a state of the “continuous present”<sup>3</sup> which recognizes the accumulation of experience as crucial to the construction and presentation of subjectivity. We begin with April and friend. And begin again, friend and April and friend.

Over the course of April’s ten years of photographic production the question of creativity, both as an artistic enterprise and as a metaphor for human existence, has been a recurring issue. For the purpose of identifying and examining the “familiar, fictional and symbolic contexts sustaining the creative process,”<sup>4</sup> and therefore human perception, April’s self has appeared in many of her works, portraying the artist in all her mythical manifestations. Consolidating four recent series of canvas-size narrative works and a few of her thematically similar earlier projects, *Voyage dans le monde des choses*, (*Journey in the World of Things*) an exhibition installed at le Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal last summer, presented April’s oeuvre as one epic, poetic ode to “the artist.”



In *Moi-même portrait de paysage* (1982, *Myself Portrait of the Countryside*), April portrays the artist as a stereotypical, big and small “c” creator, one who is responsible for the world of representations, in a world of representation. Here April pantheistically appears with light and shadow and scraps of artist’s materials, composing a series of constellations, landscapes and cityscapes.

Cast as a photographer in *Portrait de l’artiste* (1981, *Portrait of the Artist*), April is seen borrowing from and recycling this copied world, and thus acts as a metaphor for the artist as “mediator” of human perception. In the remainder of the works in this exhibition, and as a *leitmotif* throughout much of her work, April presents the artist as a cultural artificer. Alienated from nature and contained within a world of her own invention, this artist/ human underscores April’s concept of the constructed subject. Finally April’s choice, as artist, to cast herself as an artist in this project is crucial to its conceptual coherence. Citing and portraying the artist as a stereotype and therefore as commonplace — not original— serves to deny the myth of the artist as a special and distant observer of a world of which she is not a part. April depicts the artist/human as a construct, implicated within and responsible for the surrounding world.<sup>5</sup>

*Les chansons formidables* (1986–87, *The In-credible Songs*) marks April’s exit from the artist’s studio. In trading in her role of self-conscious artist for that of self-absorbed country and western fan, what was mythic isolation to April in the former is simple loneliness now. Exchanging the *atelier* for the kitchen, surrendering glamour for domesticity and torrid romance for family love, she attempts to reconcile her “being” as artist with her human “being.”

With this new work April begs a more cinematic association. Her large scale presentation, canvas-size before, now is “silver screen”-size. This and her new high-key “realistic” cinematic lighting, with its increased clarity of information, contrast with April’s earlier, painterly style of soft-edged chiaroscuro impressionism. If deconstructivist art practices have taught us anything it is that our modes of representation are relative. Where April’s previous purposeful, artistic identification demanded fictitious and subjective recognition-photography as artifice — in *Les chansons formidables* April’s cinematic realism presumes that same relativity.

Perhaps the “awesome songs” that beckon April here reveal her need to move ahead, to finish what she has set out to do — to create a multidimensional subject grounded in the world of

everyday people and things. Leaving behind self-reflection as content and subjugating it to structure, content can finally be liberated for a better purpose: “communicating wisdom as a use value to the people ... and endow them with a sense of their potential for self-realization.”<sup>6</sup>

*The fairy tale ... secretly lives on in the story... [it] tells of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had placed upon its chest.... it shows us that the questions posed by the myth are simple-minded.... The wisest thing— so the fairy tale taught mankind... is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits.... The liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man.*<sup>7</sup>

The gods of the eighties are the mass media. Operating as the primary vehicles of representation, television, movies and advertising are the sources of our present mythology. Familiarity with the characters, the action and the morality of these new myths is not inconsequential, as they are often only technologically conveyed versions of ancient myths, serving their traditional purpose — the control and maintenance of ideology. Instrumentalized by the inventions of Madison Avenue, L.A., and Hollywood they have the potential to bedazzle. This is the subject of April’s address now.

April’s plea to “mix her branches elsewhere” can be understood in two ways: it exists as the story line explaining the action, and as a call to act on the results of deconstructivism; to build a new female image — one which does not propagate the old but which begins again to “turn the street around” with an art of storytelling based in the world of the everyday. Finding the persona held up to us in our media mirror to be dangerously imbalanced, April retaliates in kind: she builds a complex female character using a cinematic mode and technique.

As Laura Mulvey has proposed in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in the movies the woman has “traditionally ... functioned on two levels [only]: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium.”<sup>8</sup> In popular cinema the image of woman is both literally constructed by men and meant to engage the male gaze. April’s production, contrarily, engages the female viewer using a script that is both personally relevant and “screen-popularized” familiar. (In the panic of selforientation we must admit to our necessary submission to these sole role models, vulnerable as we are.) In *Les chansons* April is found waiting by the telephone. Though this is a familiar, clichéd situation the

context and April's text reveal a new meaning: this is not a case of romantic passivity, but one of boredom and ambition.

In Mulvey's view the cinema's objectified female is two-dimensional and necessarily passive whereas the male, as traditional mirror identity of the viewer, is active and three-dimensional: he moves through the space on the screen, controlling the action and the objects around him. As scriptwriter, director, producer and actress, April activates the passive female role. With her image featured on a larger scale than that of the male and her propensity to describe the female character as being in control (as her camera peers through the classic pick-up truck windshield we find a woman in the driver's seat) April as heroine is better the mirrored identity of the female viewer. Still, by virtue of retaining some familiar male stereotypes — here a stalwart lover/hero walking off into the solitary night — April does not invert the problematic equation. Her leading man is not made passive and left to occupy the role of object of desire.

The examination of subjectivity in much current photographic work has served a dual purpose. First, it has determined that photographic representation is inadmissible evidence of reality in that it is ultimately subjective. Second, it has initiated a critique of the media objectification of subject as being onedimensional and ideologically programmed. Although April's project articulates these issues its intent is to offer an alternative by constructing a multidimensional and more accessible subject.

April's vision, identifying peripherally significant events or gestures that occur in inconsequential environments, and objects of symbolic, social and cultural signification (nature, motel rooms, telephones, televisions, etc.) promotes associations with the viewer's personal history. Her style, describing these objects and events using available light and a fluid camera technique, transcends this identification process and evokes an intense and resonant psychological state of pure aesthetic response. Its manifestation, however, results from the nagging familiarity of these unconscious moments and the viewer's attempt to make personal associations with them. It would seem that this is what Gertrude Stein refers to as "the sentence at the bottom of all creative activity."

*I am I not any longer when I see.*

*This sentence is at the bottom of all creative activity.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'A Transatlantic Interview- 1946' in *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, Robert Bartlett Haas, ed. (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> The "four image repertoire" of photographic portraiture is discussed by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> The "continuous present" is a term used by Gertrude Stein to describe her own narrative process of "beginning again and again," in the process of describing herself through the narrator's variety of experiences.

<sup>4</sup> Josée Belisle, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, press release for "Voyage dans le monde des choses," 1986.

<sup>5</sup> This idea comes from Rosalind Krauss's 'A Note on Photography and the Simulacral' in *October 31* (Winter 1984), pp. 49-68, where she responds to the same activity in the work of Cindy Sherman.

<sup>6</sup> Jack Zipes, "The Instrumentalization of Fantasy: Fairy Tales and the Mass Media" in *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, Kathleen Woodward, ed. (Madison: Coda Press, 1980), p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), p. 102, translated by Harry Zohn.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Screen* (Autumn 1975), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Four in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), p. 119.