

# reality DISTORTED

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**D**RESSED IN A lumberjack coat and baseball cap, the dark figure stalks up the hill to the main campus building. Driven by forces beyond his control (a bad childhood, rejection by women, failure in life ... you get the picture), he goes on a deliberate and calculated killing rampage, hunting down young women in a celebrated technical college. After killing 14 women he turns the gun on himself and blows his head off.

If you were anywhere near a radio, television or newspaper last month, you'll realize this is not the latest plot to yet another teen horror/slasher B movie. The murders are real, only a significant shift occurs in the meaning of these murders in their retelling by the media.

We try to make sense of events in our everyday lives through what Raymond Williams calls "structures of feeling." Everything from media reporting to, everyday conversations become structured by narrative and imagery. It's become so natural a way of seeing and interpreting things that we hardly

notice it at all. Events have a beginning, middle and end. This sense of closure, the feeling that things have been neatly tied up and explained, gives form to chaos.

The media's response to the brutal murder of 14 young women at L'Ecole Polytechnique falls into this trap. The continual re-telling of all the gory details of the story, point by painstaking point, structures it in a way people can easily identify with, since we are all quite familiar with the horror story genre.

The murders threaten established patterns of thinking about the place of women in our culture, the dominant view of a liberal society which believes in fairness and equality. It is unthinkable to many that Marc Lepine's murderous rampage is the logical, albeit extreme, manifestation of deeply ingrained sexist discourses in our culture.

This is why Marc Lepine must become a monstrous creature in order for us to make meaning of the situation. As a Freddie Kruger type, he becomes simple and understandable. "BASTARD," as the *Montreal Daily News* cover headline screamed out. Rather than systemic sexism, which our culture as a whole is responsible for maintaining, the murders become the product of a single deranged mind.

**"As always, women were told to be silent when anger and rage at the murders were more fitting."**

"The construction of the monstrous is a way of explaining all ills, rather as a child will say Mr. Nobody spilt the milk," writes culture critic Judith Williamson. "It mitigates against the systemic nature of problems, focusing blame instead on a particular scapegoat."

That Wednesday evening, the night of the murders, the media was already busy framing the tragedy in the terms

of a Horror film. The unresolved enigma, 'Who did it?' was answered the next day at a highly-charged televised press conference.

Television, radio, and print news media moved at a frenzied pace to find biographical material about Marc Lepine. The question soon became, 'Why?' as journalists and commentators searched for the 'key' to why Lepine murdered the women. The following Sunday's *Montreal Gazette* feature was simply titled, "WHY?" in huge three-inch-high type.

As in Horror films, where expert opinion/knowledge is sought to find out how to kill the monster (ie. wooden stakes, silver bullets, daylight, etc.), so too the media dragged out 'experts' to offer their opinions.

**"... a feminist 'reading' of the events of December 6 is not even possible within the limits mapped out by the media."**

Lepine was a battered child. He changed his name from Gamil Gharbi when he was 18. He could not relate to women. He was rejected from the armed forces. His CEGEP psychologist remembers his sudden withdrawal from school as "strange." All of this worked towards Lepine 'snapping,' and committing his crime.

This explanation fits easily into dominant discourses around women, danger, and sexuality. Lepine becomes an 'evil' incarnation, which Judith Williamson differentiates from moral values such as right and wrong, because these are framed within human activity. Good and evil are absolutes beyond the control of human beings. Thus, once again, it is possible for men to abdicate any responsibility for the murders because they stemmed from 'evil,' something beyond their control, rather than from systemic sexism.

**T**HE DEBATE WHICH emerged in the Montreal media, as well as around the city at places such as the vigil, centered on whether or not the murders are symptomatic of the escalation of violence against women in Canada. It seemed obvious to many that Lepine's shouts of, "You are all feminists," as he systematically cut down women pointed to a deeply premeditated savagery towards women.

And yet, this point was hotly contested. Barbara Frum, moderating a panel discussion on CBC's *The Journal* the night following the murders was almost obnoxious in her insistence that the murders hurt and offended both men and women. Toronto-based writer and broadcaster June Callwood pointed out repeatedly Lepine's actions stem from a culture whose tolerance of jokes about rape and wife-battering reflect a deeply ingrained acceptance of these, and the rights of men to control and hurt women.

In Montreal, at the vigil that same night, feminists were called down for speaking. Nobody wanted to hear about how these murders did not simply happen at the whim of a deranged mind, but were the logical manifestation of deeply held sexist attitudes. "Calm down," one man said to a woman who wanted to speak out, in an exchange captured by CBC television. As always, women were told to be silent when anger and rage at the murders were more fitting.

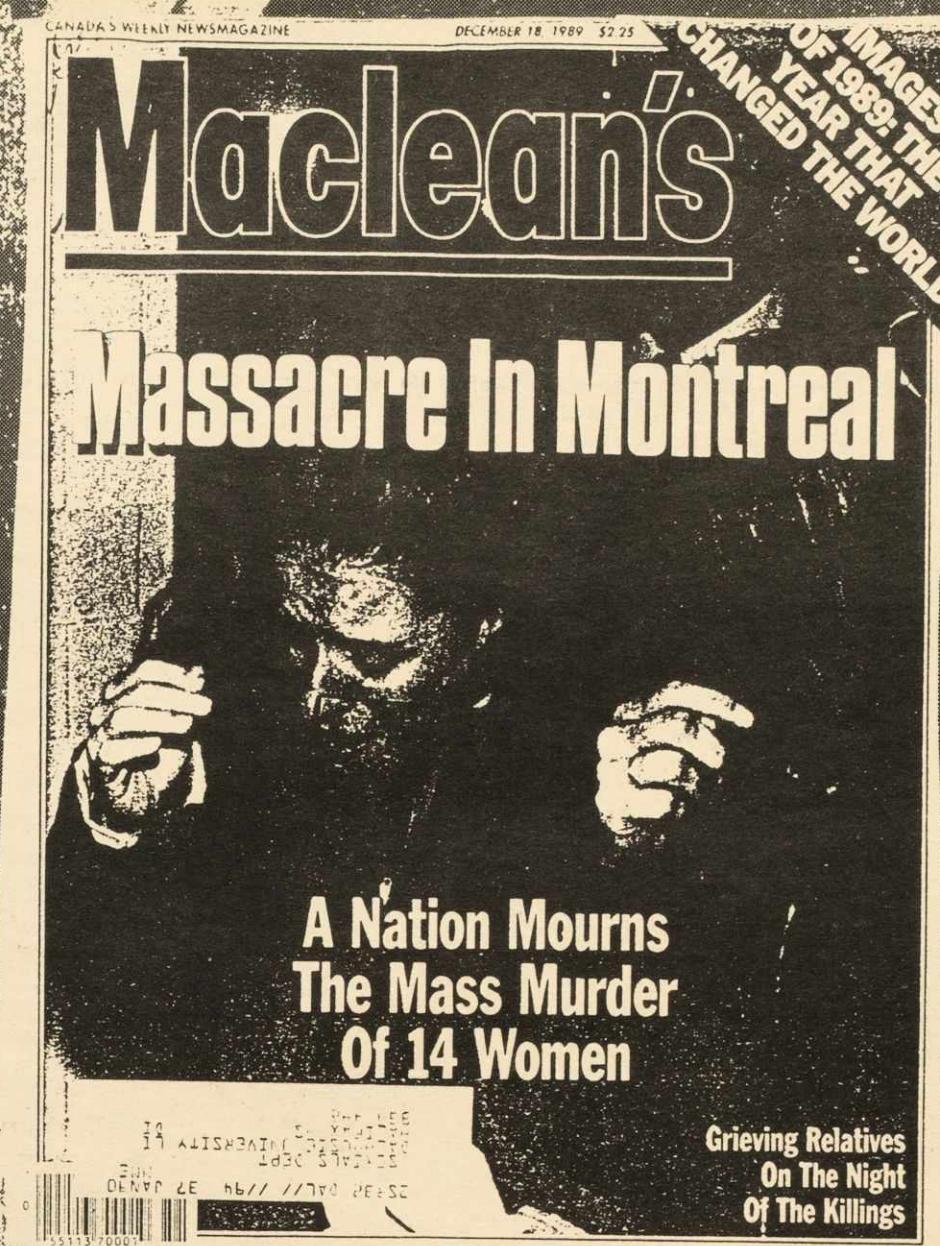
**A**NOTHER ASPECT OF THE Horror genre is its sexual subtext. Whether it's Freddie Kruger assaulting a nubile young co-ed, or vampires biting helpless maidens, or even the vulnerable baby-sitter being stalked in an empty house.

In every case, the very passivity and helplessness of the victims creates what Williamson calls a 'frisson' in the audience. Fear is sexualized, as is the innocence of the victims.

The media accounts of the massacre played up all these elements, to the horrified yet insatiable curiosity of the audience. The premier, the mayor, even the prime minister all invoked the youth and innocence of the victims.

The gory telling of details about the massacre, complete with elaborate diagrams of the killer's progress through three floors, all played to this desire. These are all codes of representation which we often unconsciously respond to, so used are we to seeing them re-created on the screen as fictions.

One photograph, taken by *Montreal Gazette* photographer Allen McInnis, depicted one of the murdered women sprawled in a chair. CBC television also had a short piece of video footage of this same scene. The photographer had to climb on the backs of two students and shot through a crack in the curtain to get the shot.



Aside from the clear lack of judgement shown in running this shot, if only to spare further pain in family members and friends, what is truly disturbing about this image is the way it is coded almost like a porn photo.

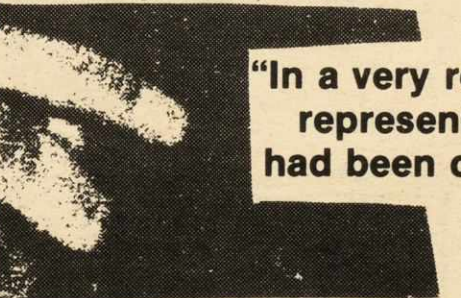
The young woman is seated in a chair, with her head and one shoulder thrown over the back of the chair. Her long hair hangs down, while her throat is exposed and vulnerable. For anyone familiar with pornography, this shot is strangely familiar. The erotic undercurrents of the shot could not have been lost on either the photographer or the editors/producers at the *Montreal Gazette* and the CBC.

Another strong element of pornography's coding is the playing upon the voyeuristic fantasies of the spectator. Part of the pleasure of being a voyeur comes from the knowledge that the image you are viewing is both authentic, yet unable to return your gaze. The *Montreal Gazette* photo was taken unawares, with the curtain still visible in the frame. This only heightens, at an unconscious level, the desire of the viewer.

**W**HAT I'VE TRIED TO MAP out, in an admittedly fragmentary manner, is a way to better understand how events become meaningful to us through the media. Despite the media's assertions of

objectivity, there is nonetheless a very narrow terrain upon which meaning is created. In this case, a feminist 'reading' of the events of December 6 is not even possible within the limits mapped out by the media.

Instead, the government and the church took over using their own ideological language to control the potential for meaning in the massacre. The funeral became a state-run affair, presided over by no less than 80 male clergy. The radical potential in mourning these women was effectively squashed as we were told by Cardinal Gregoire that the murders were "an act of God," thus beyond the control and responsibility of men.



I monitored four stations during the funeral — CBC Newswatch, CFCF, Quatre Saisons, and Tele-Metropole. Both CFCF and Tele-Metropole win the prize for obnoxious colour commentary during the funeral broadcast. Their coverage resembled a sporting event, with non-stop play by play.

Another problem with the coverage was the constant close ups of grieving family. This incredible invasion of private grief makes for great television. The only really moving parts of the funeral were the moments of complete silence, and the two brief readings by women students. It is amazing that in the more than two-hour-long service, in honour of 14 students murdered because they were women, only two women spoke.

When one looks at the context in which the funeral was framed — 80 male clergy presiding, mostly men speaking, male dignitaries in the front pews — it is obvious what is happening on the terrain of meaning making.

**"In a very real way, through the manipulation of representation, the massacre of these women had been colonized by patriarchal institutions."**

Close up of Cardinal Gregoire. Cut to a close up of Brian Mulroney. Cut to a slow zoom into one of the caskets. In a very real way, through the manipulation of representation, the massacre of

these women had been colonized by patriarchal institutions.