

Equality

Monique Wittig, the return to favor of an exiled writer

Twenty years after her death, the author, philosopher, feminist and lesbian activist is back in the spotlight. Her work has been reissued, and a symposium at the University of Geneva explores her legacy.

Fanny Scuderi t @FannyScuderi

She began writing at the age of 29 and won the Prix Médicis in 1964 for her first novel. Monique Wittig, born in 1935 in Dannemarie, Alsace, and died in 2003 at the age of 67 in Tucson, USA, was a leading figure in the Women's Liberation Movement (MLF). A lesbian feminist activist, she went into exile in the United States after tensions with her fellow students, no longer finding her place within the French feminist movement. In the U.S., she was invited as a theorist to major universities, while she was gradually forgotten in France.

And yet, from Le Monde to L'Humanité, French newspapers devoted entire pages to her on the 20th anniversary of her disparition. On the bangs, an exiled, forgotten figure, in 2023 she will reach a wider audience than in her lifetime. "For a new generation of feminists and lesbians, Monique Wittig has become a model of the committed, enraged woman who moved the lines with her pen. A junction point between Marxist-inspired feminism and today's "queer thinking", analyzes Le Monde.

“Reclaiming the masculine”

The outpouring of homage to the writer - she preferred to use the masculine form here, "in order to reappropriate the masculine who believes herself to be universal", says Libération - is affecting not only France, her country of origin, but also Geneva, which is hosting the second part of an international colloquium begun in Berkeley, California. "After a period of invisibilization, Monique Wittig is back in vogue. We'd like to do her justice and explain how her

work resonates today. For example, she is enjoying a resurgence in popularity among young people", explains Agnès Vannouvong, writer and lecturer in the Literature Department, who is co-organizing the conferences.

Proof of her current resonance, Gallimard's Editions de Minuit are reissuing her, and her life is the subject of new bibliographies and plays. While the fight against discrimination remains a topical issue, Monique Wittig has become a symbol of activism. With this paradox, spotted by Agnès Vannouvong: "Today she is much quoted, but little read."

Her writing is experimental and demanding. In her day, she was a recognized writer, a friend of Nathalie Sarraute, supported by Marguerite Duras, who called L'Opoponax "the first modern book ever written about childhood". Next came Les Guérillères (1969), an epic poem that recounts the life of a troupe of female fighters, repeating the pro- nom "elles" to describe them, and Le Corps lesbien (1973), released in paperback in early January. These books "denounce heterosexuality as a system of oppression that must be overcome by rejecting sexual categories", wrote Le Temps in 1999.

Twenty years after her death, fifty years after the publication of Le Corps lesbien, a transgressive work, Monique Wittig, now an icon, is suddenly reclaimed: "Five years after #MeToo, her writings once again take on their full meaning," exclaims Agnès Vannouvong. "In the current context, she fills a void, she proposes a radical approach. She provides the tools to rethink one's identity, a contemporary issue, she believes. Monique Wittig was already unravelling the genre in the 1960s. For example, L'Opoponax, which describes everyday life as seen through the eyes of children, is written with the personal pronoun "on", to "abolish a grammar of gender", she points out.

Contemporary issues

From translation issues to the current reception of Monique Wittig's works, the symposium program will explore her contemporaneity, now rehabilitated in Europe. It will welcome Sande Zeig, Monique Wittig's companion, with whom she wrote Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes (1976). Writers Wendy Delorme and Rebecca Chaillon, also an actress, will propose a performance inspired by the book Le Corps lesbien. "Thanks to those who have worked for her memory, under the banner of the association Les Ami.es de Monique Wittig, new generations have been able to appropriate her works, her symbol. Previously considered 'too marginal' by the publishing world, she is now being embraced by young booksellers, younger generations of authors and readers", enthuses Wendy Delorme. The avant-garde Monique Wittig seems to have found her audience at last!

"Monique Wittig: twenty years later", June 27 and 28, Uni-Mail, Geneva,

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once again take on their full meaning".**

Agnès Vannouvong, lecturer at the Faculty of Letters
Geneva University