

ISSUES IN FEMINIST FILM CRITICISM

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TEXTUAL POLITICS

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In previous writings I have discussed film practices as examples of realism: as representations, that is, which present an appearance of transparency by effacing the processes of meaning production in their own textual operations. Realism is a feature of dominant cinema, but non-dominant film practices like socialist realism and feminist documentary draw on this transparency both in order to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, and also with the assumption that a politically oppositional message will come across the more clearly to the extent that it is not complicated by "noise" from foregrounded textual operations. Such a cultural politics is grounded in an assumption that meanings—even politically oppositional meanings—exist already in society, that human subjects are already formed for such meanings, and that representations can operate as neutral vehicles for conveying those meanings from source to recipient.

Other approaches to cultural politics may, however, take different positions as to the nature of meaning. The construction of meanings may, for example, be regarded as an ongoing process of texts and reader-text relations which may work in some respects independently of the operations of other social formations. Such a stance on signification suggests that in the moment of reading, recipients of texts are themselves involved in producing meanings, even if—as in the case of realism—they are not aware of the fact. To the extent that the signification process is effaced in realist representations, it is argued, realism perpetuates illusionism, the notion that, in the case of cinema, what is on the screen is an uncoded reflection of the "real world." Illusionism may then be regarded as an ideological operation, on at least two grounds: first that the concealment of processes of signification through codes of transparency mystifies both the spectator and the signification process by setting up a view of the world as monolithically preconstructed "out there," and secondly that spectator-text relations characteristic of realist representations—identification and closure, for example—position their reading subjects as unitary and non-contradictory, and thus as neither active, nor as capable of

intervention, in the signification process. These critiques of illusionism may underpin a cultural politics which takes textual signifiers to be a legitimate area of intervention. If illusionism is a feature of certain textual practices, then it may be challenged on the level of the text by means of nonrealist or antirealist strategies and modes of address.

The present essay is devoted to a consideration of what might be termed "anti-illusionism" in cinema, and to anti-illusionist film practices as they touch on feminism. From this point of view, then, I will address the question of feminist counter-cinema. Counter-cinema may be defined as film practice which works against and challenges dominant cinema, usually at the levels of both signifiers and signifieds. Although it may challenge the institutional practices of dominant cinema too, my concern here is primarily with the text.

As textual practice, counter-cinemas attempt to challenge and subvert the operations of dominant cinema. Before proceeding to an examination of some approaches to and examples of counter-cinema, therefore, I will briefly look at features of dominant cinema which counter-cinemas (feminist or otherwise), may set out to challenge. I have already touched on the argument—and the reasoning behind it—that the effacement of processes of signification in dominant cinema is an ideological operation. The question of how this ideological operation works in cinema may be dealt with by considering how codes in dominant cinema work to construct certain kinds of spectator-text relations. For example, classic narrative codes structure relations of spectator identification with fictional characters and also with the progress of the narrative itself. By means of these identifications, the spectator is drawn into the film, so that when the questions posed by the narrative are resolved by its closure, the spectator is also "closed," completed or satisfied: in cinema, this partly operates through the "binding-in" process of suture. In documentary forms of film realism, closure, completion, and unity are brought about through identification with the coded self-presentation of the "truthfulness" of the representation, as well as through identification with, or recognition of, real-life protagonists on the screen.

But what kind of relationship might there be between the practices of counter-cinema and those of feminism? It could be argued, for example, that there is nothing specifically feminist about challenging the modes of identification and subjectivity set up by dominant cinema. If this is the case, where does feminism enter into counter-cinema? In answer to this question, I will point to two interrelated arguments on behalf of feminist counter-cinema. The first is premised on the notion that all forms of illusionism are ideologically implicated, while the second focuses more specifically on the forms of pleasure generated in the relations of spectatorship set up by dominant cinema, classic Hollywood narrative in particular.

In her 1973 pamphlet *Notes on Women's Cinema*, Claire Johnston argues that "It has been at the level of the image that the violence of sexism and capitalism has been experienced."¹ In other words, the image constructs a specific set of signifiers (as distinct from those, say, of the written word) for constructing the worldviews of a society which is both patriarchal and bourgeois. The ideological discourse of dominant cinema, certainly at the level of the film image, is therefore seen as sexist as well as capitalist. The specificity of the "patriarchal" nature of the film image is at this point analysed in terms of Lévi-Strauss's anthropological argument about woman's status as "sign" in relations of exchange between males,² while the bourgeois character of dominant cinema is associated with the mystification involved in the naturalization of operations of signification by the surface appearance of transparency of meaning. The task of constructing a feminist counter-cinema, according to this argument, involves first of all "an analysis of the functioning of signs within the discourse"³ and then a subversion of this discourse by means of antirealist or anti-illusionist textual strategies. What is at stake here, then, is a deconstructive counter-cinema whose project is to analyze and break down dominant forms as they are embedded in bourgeois and patriarchal ideology.

Following the early work of Johnston and Cook, feminist film theory began to turn its attention away from a concern with the film text as an autonomous set of formal operations and towards the question of spectator-text relations in cinema. Here, particular regard was given to relations of looking and their psychic inscription. Laura Mulvey's work on the look and cinematic representations of women was an important development in this area, and in it Mulvey also argues for the creation of new forms of pleasure in cinema. Given her argument that the codes of dominant cinema "and their relationship to formative external structures must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged,"⁴ Mulvey is clearly also advocating a deconstructive counter-cinema. Her suggestion is that in such a counter-cinema the "voyeuristic-scopophilic look" can be broken down in certain ways. However, although Mulvey's analysis appears to arrive at a prescription for film practice rather similar to Johnston's—deconstruction—her concern with the psychic structures of subjectivity opens up possible new areas of work for feminist counter-cinema. As well as shifting the debate from a consideration of the film text as an autonomous set of formal strategies, towards a notion of interaction between spectator and text, Mulvey's analysis also raises the questions of specularly and gendered subjectivity. Although the consequences of this for feminist film practice are not explicitly addressed in her article, crucial questions are implicitly raised, in that the issue of gendered subjectivity poses in turn that of a specifically feminine film language and its potential for feminist counter-cinema.

The discussion which follows is structured around the argument that oppositional textual practices in cinema which may be regarded as of

relevance to feminism fall roughly into two categories. The premises grounding each correspond more or less with those underlying the respective analyses of Johnston/Cook and Mulvey. I say more or less, because the film practices I shall be examining have not for the most part arisen in any immediate or determined sense from the theories with which I associate them. Although I would maintain that certain types of theorizing have been important in shaping feminist film practice, the influence is rarely either one way or direct. In any case, any identifiable influences emerge as much from the ways in which films may be read as from the intentions of their makers. Thus although in this case theory and practice are in important respects interrelated, it is neither possible nor desirable to map the one immediately and unproblematically onto the other. The two areas of textual practice discussed here, then, are constituted on the one hand by a counter-cinema grounded in the deconstruction of dominant cinema, and on the other by a form of cinema marked as more "other" to dominant cinema, as "feminine writing." Although it will be clear that these two areas of practice do have certain things in common, I believe their differences permit a consideration of some crucial developments and prospects for feminist counter-cinema. I shall therefore deal with them separately.

Deconstruction

As the term suggests, deconstructive cinema works by a process of breaking down. On one level, the object of the deconstruction process is the textual operations and modes of address characteristic of dominant cinema, the aim being to provoke spectators into awareness of the actual existence and effectivity of dominant codes, and consequently to engender a critical attitude toward these codes. Provocation, awareness, and a critical attitude suggest in turn a transformation in spectator-text relations from the passive receptivity or unthinking suspension of disbelief fostered by dominant modes of address to a more active and questioning position. Deconstructive cinema aims therefore to unsettle the spectator. But there is more at stake in deconstructive cinema than simply a challenge to the textual operations of dominant cinema. After all, many forms of avant-garde and experimental cinema may be read as doing just this, without—except in the very broadest sense—being defined as deconstructive. The distinguishing mark of deconstructive cinema, as against other non-dominant or anti-dominant forms, is its recruitment of the spectator's active relation to the signification process for certain signifieds, or areas of substantive concern. The distinction between form and content may help clarify this point: deconstructive cinema, it can be argued, is not definable simply by its formal strategies. Departure from the formal conventions of dominant cinema may be a necessary condition of deconstructive cinema,

but it is certainly not a sufficient one. Deconstructive cinema departs from dominant cinema in its content as well as in its form: it speaks from politically oppositional positions or concerns itself with subject matters commonly ignored or repressed in dominant cinema. But although oppositional content is necessary, it is not a sufficient condition of deconstructive cinema, either. Deconstructive cinema then may be defined by its articulation of oppositional forms with oppositional contents. If deconstructive cinema thus defines itself in relation to dominant cinema, it is not a static entity, because its character at any moment is always shaped, in an inverse manner, by dominant cinema. Deconstructive cinema is always, so to speak, casting a sideways look at dominant cinema. The term "counter-cinema"—which is in fact often understood to be synonymous with deconstruction—conveys this sense of conscious opposition very well.

It can be helpful to compare the operations and political objectives of deconstructive cinema with those of the "epic" theater associated with Berthold Brecht. Epic theater departs from more conventional theatrical forms in that, for example, narratives may be fragmented and subject to interruptions, characters may not be presented as psychologically rounded, narrative time may not be linear, and so on. The effect of these epic devices is to render impossible the kinds of spectator identification typically set up by "realist" theater. The analogy between epic theater and deconstructive cinema is grounded, in fact, in the anti-illusionist stance and strategies of distancing common to both. As Walter Benjamin says of epic theater, it

advances by fits and starts, like the images on a film strip. Its basic form is that of the forceful impact on one another of separate, distinct situations in the play. The songs, the captions included in the stage decor, the gestural conventions of the actors, serve to separate each situation. Thus distances are created everywhere which are, on the whole, detrimental to illusion among the audience. These distances are meant to make the audience adopt a critical attitude.⁵

It is clear from this that the effect of this epic form derives from the spectator-text relations it constructs. Formal devices are justified only to the extent that they evoke distancing rather than involvement, a critical attitude rather than passive receptivity.

Therefore although both epic theater and deconstructive cinema are often discussed in terms of their formal strategies—sometimes, in fact, to the extent that forms are fetishized—these strategies are important only in relation to their consequences for the address of the representation—the film or play—as a whole. The impact of epic or deconstructive representations thus arises in direct relation to the challenge they offer the operations of dominant strategies. The importance of the contextual speci-

ficity of deconstructive strategies is emphasized here mainly because my discussions of particular films will focus on their formal attributes, which seems a regrettable, but perhaps unavoidable, consequence of singling out individual texts for attention. It is important to stress, therefore, that the films I discuss as examples of deconstructive cinema acquire their deconstructive force in the final instance only from their context: only in their relation, that is, to the contemporary state of dominant cinema and to their place in the history and institutions of non-dominant cinematic forms. The films I shall look at here are *One Way Or Another* (De Cierta Manera) (Gomez, ICAIC, 1974) and *Whose Choice?* (London Women's Film Group, BFI, 1976). Both of them deal with fairly well-defined and circumscribed topics, and draw upon and articulate, while at the same time also challenging, certain conventions of narrative and documentary realism.

One Way Or Another deals with the problem of "marginalism" in post-revolution Cuba. Marginalism is the culture of poverty associated with the urban slums and shanty towns of pre-revolution days, areas marked by high levels of unemployment and delinquency, poor educational provision, violence, and economic poverty. The integration of "marginal" populations into the wider society is regarded as a priority and a problem for the revolution. The film investigates the contradictions—both personal and social—involved in the integration process by examining some of the effects of, and causal links between, certain cultural features of marginalism. It is because of its concern with tracing the relationship between the personal and familial and other social structures that *One Way or Another* may be regarded as a film which prioritizes feminist issues and political perspectives: although it does this, of course, within the terms of a broader concern with the effects of a socialist revolution. The problem of contradictions between marginal culture and the revolution present the film not only with its analytical project, but also with the problem of accessible cinematic forms for that project. The project and the problem are dealt with by the film's mobilization of two discourses: a story which has many of the qualities of a socialist realist narrative, and a documentary with voice-over.

The narrative discourse is focused primarily on the progress of a loving relationship between Mario, a worker living in a marginal district, and Yolanda, a teacher of middle-class origins drafted into a school in the area. In the socialist realist manner, the narrative discourse "traces how the internal dynamics of a single personality, family, or love affair are related to the larger social processes of the revolution."⁶ But at the same time, it does not construct the kinds of identification typical of socialist realist modes of address, primarily because the narrative is articulated with another, and very different, discourse, that of documentary realism.

Throughout the film, there are sequences of documentary with voice-over commentary, which address the problem of marginalism from the

point-of-view of a distanced, if sympathetic, social observer. Thus for instance, following immediately on the pre-credit and credit sequences is a documentary sequence showing the demolition of some city slums and the reconstruction of the area, with a voice-over which explains that elimination of the slum conditions has not resulted in the disappearance of certain features of marginal culture. In this way, the notion of contradictory relations between social formations and an analytical approach to such contradictions are established within both the signifiers and the signifieds of the text. The film takes up two different conventions of cinematic realism, but in combining them in certain ways undercuts the spectator-text relations which would be set up by each one on its own. This type of deconstruction works by means of its direct reference to dominant cinematic codes, setting up, through familiarity with such codes, certain expectations in the spectator. These expectations are then cut off because the film offers no single internally consistent discourse.

Examples of distancing in the discourses of *One Way Or Another* may be cited with reference to some of the formal strategies associated with epic theater. For example, the interaction of narrative and documentary discourses in the film works in a similar way to the separations and "fits and starts" of epic theater. During a sequence in which Mario and Yolanda exchange confidences about their past lives Mario confesses that he once seriously considered becoming a *ñañigo*, a member of a male secret society. At this point, the narrative is cut off by an intertitle: "Abacua society—documentary analysis"—followed by an account, with documentary footage and voice-over, of the history of these secret societies and their roots in and connections with marginalism. The first concern at this point is with a description and analysis of one of the ways in which marginal culture still persists after the revolution. At the same time, however, this documentary interlude is marked as functioning analogously to a flashback (Mario's), for afterwards the narrative discourse resumes where it left off, with Yolanda telling Mario the story of her own background—her marriage, divorce, and current independence.

Epic theater is characterized also by an undercutting of identification with fictional characters, in that psychologically rounded representations are refused. While epic interruptions will in themselves function to cut off spectator identification with characters, there is another Brechtian device associated specifically with this form of distancing—"acting as quotation." Instead of inhabiting and "becoming" their characters, actors will, as it were, stand in for them in the distanced mode of "quoting" characters' words. Although in *One Way Or Another* much of the acting is in fact quite naturalistic, it does take on some of the features of "quotation" but usually through cinematic, rather than dramatic, means. The first documentary sequence, for example, which ends with a reference to education in the marginal areas, is immediately followed by a close-up of a woman talking directly to the camera in lip-synch, *cinéma vérité* style,

about her work as a teacher. It subsequently transpires that the woman is Yolanda, who actually belongs to the fictional part of the film, but at this point her discourse is marked as "documentary" by its codes and context. This has the effect of cutting off identification and relativizing the acting in later sequences.

How do these distancing devices serve the analytical project of *One Way Or Another*? In the first place, the distancing itself tends to force the spectator into an active relation with the text, opening up the potential for questioning and analysis. The different discourses, moreover, are put together in such a way as to integrate analysis at the levels of signifier and signified. Halting Mario's talk about being a *ñañigo* with a descriptive "aside" about Abacua society serves both to complete the reference and also to unpack the wealth of social, cultural, and historical meaning encapsulated by it. The interaction of narrative and documentary codes, then, underscores the substantive sociological analysis. The enunciating discourse of the film as a whole thereby privileges an analytical approach to its signifieds.

Whose Choice? constructs similar modes of address in its treatment of the issues of contraception and abortion. The film operates in a relatively complex manner, by presenting its material as three discourses—information, interviews, and narrative. In the interviews, two women detail the current situation in Britain as regards abortion and present a number of arguments in favor of "a woman's right to choose." The film also includes documentary footage of the June 1975 National Abortion Campaign demonstration in London. Added to—and transformed by—the documentary/informational aspects of these two discourses is a fictional narrative about a young woman's attempt to obtain an abortion. This third discourse is marked also by some of the distancing devices characteristic of epic theater, in particular lack of characterization and narrative interruptions. The address of the film is constructed not only severally by its three discourses, but also as a whole by the ways in which the discourses are articulated together. There is little rigid separation in terms of the overall organization of the film between elements of narration, information, and interview, for example. Throughout, one discourse leads into, or is interrupted by, another—once more in the Brechtian manner.

Like *One Way Or Another*, *Whose Choice?* takes up familiar realist forms, and then deconstructs them by means of fragmentation and interruption, thereby transforming the spectator-text relations which would be privileged by each discourse on its own. This transformation marks a move away from identification, involvement, and suspension of disbelief and toward a more active and questioning attitude to the processes of signification of the film and to its areas of concern. If *One Way Or Another* deconstructs the conventions of Hollywood and socialist realist narrative and traditional documentary, *Whose Choice?* offers a challenge to the kinds of documentary address commonly associated with the agitational/

political film. The intended consequence of these deconstructive strategies is to open up space for active intervention on the part of spectators in the meaning production process, to subvert the completion and closure of meaning proposed by dominant cinema, and thus to offer spectators the opportunity to consider their positions on the issues at hand through their own processes of active reading, questioning, and discussion. The oppositional character of the forms of expression of deconstructive cinema thus ideally works in conjunction with its matters of expression. *One Way Or Another* presents itself as oppositional on a fairly general level—as an example of Third World cinema and as dealing with problems arising in a developing and revolutionary society. Its treatment of the personal and the familial underscores this oppositionality, for these concerns have frequently been repressed even in revolutionary cinema. *Whose Choice?* deals with a topic which is either repressed in dominant discourses or, if not actually repressed, treated from different political perspectives: the film may be regarded as oppositional by virtue of its treatment of contraception and abortion from a feminist standpoint.

Feminine Voices

A concern shared by feminist representations of many kinds and across all media is an intent to challenge dominant modes of representation. This concern is premised on the notion that in a sexist society, women have no language of their own and are therefore alienated from culturally dominant forms of expression. This permits a feminist politics of intervention at the levels of language and meaning, which may be regarded as equally applicable to the “language” of cinema as it is to the written and spoken word. A politics of this kind can have two aspects: it may on the one hand challenge the dominance of certain forms of signification, and on the other move toward the construction of new, non-dominant, forms. The latter, of course, includes the former, but also goes further by posing the possibility of a specifically feminist or feminine language. Deconstructive cinema, in taking up and breaking down dominant forms and matters of expression, operates predominantly as a challenge to dominant cinema. I want now to look at some signifying practices which may be regarded as moving beyond the modes of expression privileged within patriarchal ideology. The distinction between the deconstruction of existing forms of representation and the creation of new ones is to some extent one of degree rather than of kind. In the first place, deconstruction may be regarded as an important—and perhaps even a necessary—step toward more radical forms of rupture. And in any case, in a situation where certain forms of representation are culturally dominant, alternative forms—however radical and regardless of their actual textual operations and modes of address—will always tend to be construed as a challenge to dominant forms. It

should be emphasized, then, that the films discussed in this context may also be read (and indeed most of them have been read) as examples of deconstructive cinema.

The issue of a non-patriarchal language immediately raises the question of the relationship between such a language and feminism. Although it is clear that the question of women and language could not be raised in the ways it has been without the impetus of feminist politics, the nature and provenance of such a language remains rather more problematic. Posing the question of a women's language may be a feminist act, but are we talking here about a feminist language or a feminine language? If the question is of a feminine language, where does such a language come from? I have discussed elsewhere certain theories of femininity and language which are being developed by feminist writers and theorists and will not repeat the arguments here, save to reiterate that they are grounded in theories of female subjectivity as constructed in and by language. To this extent, then, the concern is with feminine language rather than feminist language. And although the possibility of feminine language could not even begin to be raised were it not for the existence of feminist politics, the converse is not necessarily true. This point has to be borne in mind in any consideration of the possibility of “authentic” forms of expression for women, and it is certainly at issue in “feminine writing” in the cinema.

Arguments on the question of feminine writing suggest first of all that certain texts privilege relations of subjectivity which are radically “other” to the fixity of subject relations set up by dominant forms of signification, and secondly, that the “otherness” of such texts is related to, or emerges from, their articulation of feminine relations of subjectivity. This is perhaps the crucial point of distinction between deconstructive texts and feminine texts. Whereas the former tend to break down and challenge the forms of pleasure privileged by dominant texts, the latter set up radically “other” forms of pleasure (in Roland Barthes's term, *jouissance*, or bliss). The possibility of such “other” forms of pleasure in cinematic representations is raised in Laura Mulvey's theoretical work (as well as in her film practice, as co-director of *Riddles of the Sphinx* in particular). If the pleasure of dominant cinema draws on narcissistic and fetishistic scopophilia, Mulvey argues, any alternative approach needs to construct forms of pleasure based in different psychic relations.⁷ A suggestion by Claire Johnston that a feminist film practice should aim at “putting . . . the subject in process by textual practice”⁸ indicates moreover that what is at stake here is a feminine cinematic writing, a cinema of *jouissance*.

Certain recent film practices may in fact be read as developments in this direction, and in this context, I shall look at four specific examples: *Thriller* (Potter, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979), *Lives of Performers* (Rainer, 1972), *Daughter Rite* (Citron, 1978) and *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Akerman, Paradise Films/Unité Trois, 1975). My argument is that these films share a discourse which sets up

the possibility of sexual difference in spectator-text relations by privileging a "feminine voice." They pose the possibility of a feminine writing which would construct new forms of pleasure in cinema. The areas through which the "feminine voice" speaks in these films include relations of looking, narrativity and narrative discourse, subjectivity and autobiography, fiction as against non-fiction, and openness as against closure.

Thriller is structured around a rearrangement of narrative discourse in dominant cinema by the instatement of a woman's questioning voice as the film's organizing principle. The film is a reworking of the opera *La Bohème*, which is about a doomed love affair between a poet and a young seamstress: the woman finally dies of consumption. *Thriller* is told from the narrative point-of-view of Mimi, the tragic heroine, whose interrogatory voice-over pervades the film. The enigma set up by the film's narrative is the question of how and why Mimi died, the investigator ("I") being Mimi herself. By its recruitment of investigatory narrative structure and first-person voice-over, *Thriller* at once draws upon, parodies, challenges, and transforms the narrative and cinematic codes of the Hollywood film noir. The female victim adds a twist to the reconstruction of her own death not only by telling the story herself, but also by considering causes for the unhappy romance and death of a young French working woman of a kind—social and historical conditions, for instance—that could not possibly enter the universe either of operatic tragedy or of the private investigator of film noir.

Lives of Performers is also, on one level, a reworking of the conventions of popular narrative genres. The film is subtitled "a melodrama," and the narrative conventions it draws on are those of the "backstage romance." In thirteen long sequences, it tells the story of the relationships between a man and two women, a triangle. The characters, however, are "playing" themselves—they are real-life performers in the group of dancers working with the filmmaker, Yvonne Rainer. The film departs quite radically from dominant conventions of film narrative in its ordering and structure, and in the freedom with which it articulates elements of fiction and non-fiction. The plot, for instance, proceeds by leaps and bounds punctuated by runnings on the spot—by ellipsis and accretion, in other words. Rainer says of her films: "For me the story is an empty frame on which to hang images and thoughts which need support. I feel no obligation to flesh out this armature with credible details of location and time."⁹ The story of *Lives of Performers* is told with so many asides that we never quite get to the end or the bottom of it. There is no resolution. The "asides" are the accretions, and the accretions are so many that they seem to call forth gaps elsewhere in the story, as if to make up for lost time. The first sequence shows the performers, whose lives the melodrama is about, in rehearsal for what turns out to be a real-life Rainer performance. An intertitle: "all at once our tension vanished" leads into the next sequence, in which the three star performers "recall," as voice-over, their first meeting, with still

photographs of Rainer's dance piece "Grand Union Dreams" on the image track. These recollections are punctuated at points by the filmmaker's explanations of what is going on in the photographs. Where does the "real" end and the "fiction" begin? The subsequent cinematic rendering of the romance is interrupted wherever "other concerns" seem more important—by a disquisition on acting, for example ("The face of this character is a fixed mask"), or a direct question to the spectator about the problem of character identification ("Which woman is the director most sympathetic to?" asks one of the women in the triangle, looking directly into camera). The narrative of *Lives of Performers* has its own logic, then, but it is not that of the enigma-resolution structure of classic narrative. Nor does it construct a closed and internally coherent fictional world: on the contrary, it opens itself up at numerous points to intrusions from the "real world."

What does this heterogeneous narrative voice imply for spectator-text relations? It is clear that none of the subject relations posed by classic narrative is at work here: identification with characters is impossible, and there is no narrative closure. The narrative processes of ellipsis and accretion offer, on the contrary, the possibility of pleasures other than those of completion. Firstly, in moments of accretion (for example, during a long single-take sequence with virtually static camera, in which one of the performers dances a solo), the spectator has the option of pleasurable and open-ended contemplation of an image which constructs no particularly privileged viewpoint. The ellipses offer the possibility of a rather different pleasure, that of piecing together fragments of the story—the active pleasure, that is, of working on a puzzle. The interpenetration of fictional and non-fictional worlds and the lack of narrative closure set up a radical heterogeneity in spectator-text relations, and finally refuse any space of unitary subjectivity for the spectator. The textual practice of *Lives of Performers* may then be regarded as a "putting in process of the viewing subject."

As part of its articulation of fiction and non-fiction, *Lives of Performers* includes, at times, discourses readable as autobiographical. The second sequence of the film, mentioned above, exemplifies this, and the autobiographical concern becomes more apparent in Rainer's next film, *Film About A Woman Who . . .* (1974). *Daughter Rite*, Michelle Citron's film about mother-daughter and sister-sister relations, is even more pervasively autobiographical, but whereas in Rainer's films, the would-be autobiographical material is somewhat distanced—it may be told in the third person, "she" instead of "I," or characters may be substituted for one another—the discourse of *Daughter Rite* seems more immediate and intimate: the autobiographical voice of the film, for example, is always the same and always speaks in the first person. Splitting in the film's discourse arises elsewhere, however, in the relationships between sound and image and in the juxtaposition of the film's different sequences. The film as a whole proceeds by alternations between sequences of "journal discourse"

in which a woman (the filmmaker?) talks about her relationship with her mother, and sequences—marked cinematically as “direct” documentary—in which two sisters act out their relationships with one other and with their absent mother. In the “journal discourse,” the image is composed of 8mm home movies, presumably of the speaker’s childhood, optically printed on 16mm, and slowed down, looped, and replayed.

Previously, I discussed the autobiographical structure which is common to many feminist documentary films, and argued that the combination of autobiographical material with documentary codes permitted identification on the part of female spectators with the women in the films. *Daughter Rite* may be read as both drawing on and critiquing the autobiographical structures of these earlier examples of feminist filmmaking.¹⁰ The directness and universality of the experience remains, particularly in the daughter’s voice-over. But the film nevertheless adopts a quite complex and critical stance on the question of the “truthfulness” of autobiographical and documentary discourses. This is evident first of all in the sound/image relationship of the “journal” sequences. The daughter talks about her relationship with her mother by referring to events in the daughter’s childhood. At the same time, the home movie footage, in depicting childhood scenes, may be read as “illustrating” the voice-over. The magnification and graininess of the image and its slow movement and repetitiousness suggest also a close scrutiny of the past for clues about the present. The irony is that however hard the image is examined for clues, it cannot in the end deliver the goods. The assumption that sound and image support one another is a trap. The spectator has to draw her own conclusions about, for instance, the laughing and smiling mother of the family world of the home movies—a world where the sun constantly shines and whose inhabitants are always on holiday—and the pitiful mother talked about on the soundtrack who “works so hard to fill her empty hours.” The film’s critical position in relation to autobiography, too, works in the articulation, the one interrupting the other, of the “journal” with the “sisters” sequences. The latter scenes, despite their “documentary” appearance, actually tread a borderline between fiction and non-fiction, as becomes apparent in the increasing unlikelihood of some of the situations acted out in them. The uncertainty evoked by this play of fiction and non-fiction may remain until the end of the film, when it is revealed in the credits that the “sisters” are in fact actresses.

Although at one level the articulation of the different discourses of *Daughter Rite* works to produce distance in the relation between spectator and text, the film is difficult to read purely as an example of deconstructive cinema. The distanciation, if such it is, is not that of the critical spectator of the Brechtian film. The subject matter and the intimacy of the address of *Daughter Rite* draw the spectator closely into the representation, in effect replicating the pain and ambivalence of our hostile and loving feelings towards those to whom we are closest, our mothers in particular. At

the same time, its discourses open up space for an involved but critical approach to those feelings, a kind of detached passion. Moreover, if only by virtue of the kinds of issues it deals with, the film constructs an address which acknowledges sexual difference as crucial in the signification process. Male and female spectators will surely read this film differently. At the same time, the representation clearly constructs no unitary subjectivity for spectators of either gender. *Daughter Rite* appears to offer a relationship of spectator and text in which distanciation does not necessarily ensue from gaps between discourses, although an actively critical perspective might.

Jeanne Dielman . . . also invites a distanced involvement, but of a rather different kind. This 3½-hour long narrative film is a document of three days in the life of a Belgian petit-bourgeois widow, housewife and mother. Her movements around her flat, her performance of everyday chores, are documented with great precision: many of her tasks are filmed in real time. Jeanne’s rigid routine includes a daily visit from a man—a different one each day—whose fees for her sexual services help maintain her and her son. The man’s visit is slotted neatly between Jeanne’s preparations for dinner and her son’s arrival home. Every shot in the film is photographed at medium distance from its subject, with static camera mounted at about five feet from the ground. Many shots also work as autonomous sequences—a whole scene unfolds in a single take. There is thus none of the cutting back and forth characteristic of classic narrative. There are no reverse shots, match cuts, or cut-ins, for example, and camera point-of-view maintains a relentless distance from the action. These cinematic elements of *Jeanne Dielman* . . . function to establish the rhythm and order of Jeanne’s repetitive household routines, the woman’s means of maintaining control over her life. By the afternoon of the second day, the narrative has set up a series of clear expectations as to what Jeanne will do and when. At this point something (an orgasm with her second client?) provokes disorder in Jeanne’s highly-structured world, and a series of parapraxes ensues. Jeanne forgets to comb her hair when the client leaves, she burns the potatoes, she leaves the lid off the tureen where she keeps her earnings. Erupting into Jeanne’s ordered routine, and disrupting the expectations set up for the spectator by the cinematic representation of that routine, these tiny slips assume enormous and distressing proportions. *Jeanne Dielman* . . . can in some respects be read as a structural/minimalist film (like Michael Snow’s *Wavelength*, for example), in that the nature and duration of the representation call on the spectator to work out the structures governing the film’s organization, and thus eventually to predict what will happen next. Any disruption of these expectations can then seem quite violent. It is established, for instance, that Jeanne “always” gets up in the morning before her son, puts on a blue robe, and buttons it meticulously from top to bottom. On the third day, however, she misses a button, a slip which is immediately noticeable and assumes

great significance—but the enunciation of the film nevertheless ensures that it is no more nor less significant than Jeanne's final "slip," the murder of her third client.

Jeanne Dielman . . . may be regarded as important in several ways for the question of feminine writing in cinema. Of particular significance are the qualities of the cinematic image and the relations of looking which it sets up. In the first place, the very fact that the film shows a woman doing housework sets *Jeanne Dielman* . . . apart from virtually all other fiction films. Domestic labor has probably never been documented in such painstaking detail in a fiction film: for example, one sequence-shot about five minutes in length shows Jeanne preparing a meat loaf for dinner on the third day. The positioning of the camera in relation to the profilmic event at the same time constructs the representations of the woman's routine work as "a discourse of women's looks, through a woman's viewpoint."¹¹ Chantal Akerman, the film's director, has said that the relatively low mounting of the camera corresponds with her own height and thus constructs a "woman's-eye-view" on the action. More important, perhaps, is the refusal to set up privileged points-of-view on the action by close-ups, cut-ins, and point-of-view shots. The relentless distance of the camera's (and the spectator's) look and the duration involved in representations of Jeanne's activities mean that "the fact of prostitution, the visualization of the murder, in some respects evens out into equal significance with the many conventionally less important images: Jeanne peeling potatoes; Jeanne kneading raw hamburger into a meat loaf."¹² Finally, the refusal of reverse shots in the film entails a denial of the "binding-in" effect of the suture of classic cinema: the spectator is forced to maintain a distance in relation to both narrative and image, constructing the story and building up narrative expectations for herself. The familiarity of Jeanne's tasks and the precision with which they are represented, combined with the refusal of suture, serve to free the look of the spectator while also, perhaps, shifting it toward the attitude of "passionate detachment" that Laura Mulvey speaks of.

These four films—*Thriller*, *Lives of Performers*, *Daughter Rite*, and *Jeanne Dielman* . . . —hold out the possibility of a "feminine language" for cinema, by offering unaccustomed forms of pleasure constructed around discourses governed either—quite literally—by a woman's voice, or by a feminine discourse that works through other cinematic signifiers. What I am suggesting is that although part of the project of feminine writing in cinema is obviously to offer a challenge to dominant modes of cinematic representation, its procedures for doing so go beyond deconstruction, in that their references to dominant cinema are oblique rather than direct. There are other differences, too, between deconstructive cinema and feminine cinematic writing. First, if it is accepted that feminine writing privileges heterogeneity and multiplicity of meanings in its modes

of address, then it will have a tendency towards openness. The deconstructive text seems to work rather differently, however, in that although it too refuses the fixed subjectivity characteristic of classic spectator-text relations, meanings are limited by the fact that the various discourses of the text tend to work in concert with one another to "anchor" meaning. Thus although the spectator may be unsettled or distanced by epic interruptions, "acting as quotation," and so on, each of the fragmented discourses will tend to work in a common direction—in terms, certainly, of their matters of expression. It is perhaps no coincidence that both the examples of deconstructive cinema discussed here have highly circumscribed and predefined subject matters. The different discourses of the text may address these topics in different ways, but in the end there is a degree of overdetermination in the signification process. The space for active participation in the viewing process is opened up by the different modes of address of the discourses structuring the text, as well as by the ways in which they are articulated together. If, for example, *Whose Choice?* presents different discourses around its central concerns, those discourses when taken together constitute the film's subject matter in a particular way, so that the act of reading tends to be directed at differences of position and point of view on contraception and abortion between, say, the medical profession, the ordinary woman who requires an abortion, and feminists. It may therefore be concluded that deconstructive cinema can be tendentious, while at the same time allowing the spectator the space to negotiate her or his own position, but always in relation to a specific set of issues. If this is indeed the case, then a feminist deconstructive cinema is possible: feminist, that is, in its textual operations and matters of expression, and also feminist in intent.

I would argue, on the other hand, that tendentiousness and feminine cinematic writing do not necessarily go together. If the "femininity" of a film emerges in the moment of reading, then clearly the intentions of its producers are not necessarily either here or there. This is well illustrated in the case of *Lives of Performers*: although there is some uncertainty as to whether or not Rainer is actually a feminist,¹³ it does seem clear that when she made *Lives of Performers* she did not consciously intend any specifically feminist input, either as "form" or as "content." And yet the film has been widely taken up by feminists. This suggests two things: first, that a text may be feminist, or of interest to feminists, without being tendentious, and second, that non-tendentious texts may be seized as feminist in the moment of reading. Rainer's films were made in the milieu of the New York avant-garde art scene, whose practices at the time generally had little connection with feminist politics. Rainer's films have, however, subsequently been taken up within other cultural milieux, notably among feminists, and read as being of feminist interest. The context within which such films are received is therefore obviously crucial for the meanings they can generate.

But this is not the whole story. It would surely be wrong to suggest that signifiers, even in "feminine" film texts, are completely free-floating: there are limitations to openness. Certain feminine film texts are not regarded as feminist simply because, by pure chance, they have been interpreted as such by certain audiences. Each of the films discussed here draws on certain matters of expression which, although not necessarily speaking feminist issues directly, may be regarded as doing so tangentially. Again, Yvonne Rainer's films usefully illustrate the point, precisely because Rainer's stance on feminism might problematize her films for those who want to claim them as feminist in intent. B. Ruby Rich, for example, argues that Rainer's work is central to feminism, not because of any intentionality on the part of the filmmaker, but because of the narrative conventions they take up and the modes of address they construct.¹⁴ The "backstage romance" of *Lives of Performers* refers to a film genre that, in classic cinema, has been both attractive to and manipulative of women—the melodrama. The film offers both a pleasurable reworking and an ironic undercutting of this genre. The other three films I have discussed here similarly draw on, criticize, and transform the conventions of cultural expressions traditionally associated with women: *Thriller*, the melodramatic story of doomed love, *Daughter Rite*, autobiography and the "family romance," and *Jeanne Dielman . . .*, the family melodrama.

If deconstructive cinema sets up the possibility of an active spectator-text relation around a specific set of signifieds, and if feminine cinematic writing offers an openness of address in combination with matters of expression in relation to which spectators may situate themselves as women and/or as feminists, then clearly a feminist counter-cinema is not simply a matter of texts or "form plus content." In different ways and in varying degrees, the moment and conditions of reception of films are also crucial. The question of feminist counter-cinema is by no means exhausted by a discussion of feminist or feminine film texts: it has, in the final instance, to be considered also in terms of its institutional conditions of production and reception.

NOTES

1. Claire Johnston, "Introduction," in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnston, London: Society for Education in Film and Television (1973), p. 2.
2. Pam Cook and Claire Johnston, "The Place of Women in the Cinema of Raoul Walsh," in *Raoul Walsh*, ed. Phil Hardy, Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival (1974).
3. Johnston, "Introduction," p. 3.
4. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), p. 17.

5. Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, London: New Left Books (1973), p. 21.
6. Julia Lesage, "One Way Or Another: Dialectical, Revolutionary, Feminist," *Jump Cut*, no. 20 (1979), p. 21.
7. Mulvey.
8. Claire Johnston, "Towards a Feminist Film Practice: Some Theses," *Edinburgh Magazine*, no. 1 (1976), p. 58.
9. *Camera Obscura*, "Yvonne Rainer: An Introduction," *Camera Obscura*, no. 1 (1976), p. 89.
10. Jane Feuer, "Daughter Rite: Living with Our Pain and Love," *Jump Cut*, no. 23 (1980).
11. Janet Bergstrom, "Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles by Chantal Akerman," *Camera Obscura*, no. 2 (1977), p. 118.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
13. Lucy Lippard, "Yvonne Rainer on Feminism and Her Film," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, New York: Dutton (1976); B. Ruby Rich, "The Films of Yvonne Rainer," *Chrysalis*, no. 2 (1977).
14. *Ibid.*