THE POPULAR PLEASURES OF FILM:

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

by

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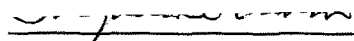   Feminist Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Pleasure is arguably *the* central issue in the feminist debate around women and representation. The discussion has been particularly contentious in film studies. In the early days of feminist film criticism, pleasure was repudiated, being perceived as inextricably linked with dominant (patriarchal) ideology. More recently, however, the mood has shifted. Pleasure is gradually coming into favour, as its critical potential becomes more apparent.

The thesis traces the contours of the pleasure debate, from the perspective of both feminist film criticism and feminist film practice. The principal theories and methods of feminist film analysis of the last fifteen years are reviewed, as are the basic features of the feminist film aesthetic as they have developed over the same time frame. Two quite distinct conceptions of pleasure emerge from this review; the differences between them are explicated in depth, and a synthesis is proposed.

While the thesis deals specifically with film, the issues it raises are relevant to other popular cultural practices as well. After all, popular culture would not be popular were it not for pleasure. The thesis argues that pleasure is crucial to a feminist cultural politics, and concludes that the theory and the practice of pleasure must be made to coincide in order for this politics to be truly successful.

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INTRODUCTION

Pleasure has long been a subject of debate within feminist film culture. In the early days of feminist film criticism and theory, pleasure was repudiated, being perceived as inextricably linked with dominant (patriarchal) ideology. More recently, however, the mood has shifted. Pleasure is gradually coming into favour, as its critical potential becomes more apparent.

This thesis will trace the contours of the pleasure debate, from the perspective of both film criticism and film practice. There have been many twists and turns along the way, as new methods of analysis and filmmaking strategies have been implemented. Each new development in the theory of pleasure has informed the practice of pleasure; this in turn has contributed to further adjustments of the theory. From the start, then, the theory and the practice of pleasure have been intertwined.

My investigation of pleasure is a timely one. Many feminist filmmakers today are working within a narrative aesthetic. Still others, although not narrative filmmakers per se, find themselves working more and more with narrative. When 'pleasure' first entered the critical lexicon fifteen-odd years ago, narrative cinema and the pleasures it invoked were widely denounced. What has transpired in the intervening moments?

The thesis will pose a number of additional questions: How did pleasure come to be introduced in the discussion around women and representation? How has it shifted the terms of the debate over the past fifteen years? What are the different ways in which pleasure has been spoken about? What are its implications for female spectatorship? To what political ends can an analysis of pleasure be put? By attempting to answer these questions, I hope to provide a more thorough understanding of pleasure and of its role in popular cultural consumption.

In the first chapter, 'Feminist Cinema: From Then to Now', I provide an overview of the history of women's cinema, outlining the basic features of each successive aesthetic. I pay particular attention to the trend toward narrative filmmaking and consider both the reasons for it and its potential implications for female spectatorship and pleasure.

In Chapter Two, 'Feminist Film Theory and Criticism: A Historical Overview', I review and critique the major theories and methods that were used in the analysis of films up until the mid-1980s. Here I focus in on the twin issues of spectatorship and pleasure, outlining some of the more important models that have been proposed in this regard. I also address the somewhat contentious issue of the place of pleasure in feminist film practice.

The third chapter, 'New Directions for Feminist Film Theory and Criticism', traces the emergence of a new theoretical framework for feminist film studies, one which has been

largely inspired by British cultural studies. I present three different versions of this approach, paying particular attention to how pleasure is (or is not) configured within them. I argue that this approach significantly shifts the terms of the debate on pleasure and demonstrate why.

In my fourth and final chapter, 'Theory and Practice: A Politics of Pleasure', I recapitulate and account for the two very different perceptions of pleasure that my review of the literature uncovers. Rather than choosing between the two, I demonstrate how they can (and indeed are beginning to) be used in tandem. I highlight the connections between the theory and the practice of pleasure as they have been played out in feminist film culture, and argue that it is precisely this correspondence which makes contemporary feminist pleasure politics so effective.

Some might ask, why now, when feminism seems to have posed the question of pleasure so exhaustively? While some critics do attest to a certain *ennui* within feminist film criticism at the moment, particularly with regard to spectatorship,[1] I think it is more a case of distraction than anything else. Certainly, the issue of pleasure *has* fallen by the wayside of late, as we shall see, but this is because there are a number of more general methodological and theoretical problems to sort out as film feminism adopts this new, cultural studies-type framework. The intention with the thesis is to bring the discussion

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[1]Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane, in their introduction to a special *camera obscura* issue on female spectatorship. [1989a:15]

of pleasure back on line. Pleasure is by no means passé – on the contrary, it is finally coming into its own.

Indeed, pleasure should be highlighted in any discussion of popular cultural forms. Popular culture would not be popular were it not for pleasure. As we shall see, the feminist critique of pleasure has been extensive, and has contributed much to the understanding of the relation between gender, representation, and popular cultural consumption.

CHAPTER ONE
FEMINIST CINEMA: FROM THEN TO NOW

Introduction

In order to provide a context for what will be primarily a theoretical discussion of pleasure, this chapter will be devoted to feminist film practice. I begin with a brief overview of the history of women's cinema, which I have charted loosely as an evolution from the realist documentary style to avant-garde practice. I also note the emergence of a new aesthetic, one which combines experimental techniques with narrative conventions. Here I use the films and writings of Yvonne Rainer as an example. The final section describes this aesthetic in more detail, and outlines briefly some of the theoretical issues that pertain to it. This initial framing of the issues around female spectatorship and pleasure should prove useful as we move into a more extensive review of the feminist film critical literature in the following chapters.

But first I must specify what I actually mean with the term 'women's cinema.' This expression is not without its problems. By and large it is used to refer to cinema by, for and about women. Yet as Teresa de Lauretis has pointed out, not all films made by women are necessarily directed at a female or feminist audience. Likewise, there are films made by men which are aimed primarily at women. [de Lauretis 1990:8] Furthermore, to equate 'women's cinema' with 'cinema by, for and about women' also excludes the important contributions that feminist film criticism has made and continues

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to make to the discourse of feminism and film. In order to capture the mutually informing relationship of theory and practice, I prefer to use wherever possible the more inclusive expression, 'feminist film culture.' For referring specifically to film practice, 'feminist cinema' will be the operative term.

Which leads me into yet another minefield: how to define the term 'feminist'? It is not something for which I have any easy answers. I might characterize a film or a critical approach as feminist because it speaks to me in that way, but this does not necessarily mean that the filmmaker or critic intended it in this way. I suspect that we are all guilty of such projections. Working our way around them is not easy.[1] All I can do at this point is to acknowledge my bias, and to propose a few identifying marks and working definitions.

For instance, de Lauretis claims that "if there has been one trait most markedly characteristic of women's cinema, I would say that it has been *the project to work with and against narrative.*" [de Lauretis 1990:9, emphasis hers] While this is probably true of all three incarnations of feminist cinema, it is especially so of the current one. Her phrasing here ("with and against") is deliberate — for de Lauretis the most effective way of subverting dominant forms is to work both from within and from without, at one and the same time. As we shall see, this both/and theme reappears again and again in the

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[1] I am not even sure that I want to!

recent film critical literature, to the point that it has become an identifiably feminist strategy.

This identifying characteristic aside, de Lauretis reminds us that "the phrase 'feminist cinema' is a notation for a process rather than an aesthetic or typological category: the notation for a process of reinterpretation and retextualization of cultural images and narratives...." [de Lauretis 1987:115] And as Judith Mayne puts it, writing of her book *The Woman at the Keyhole*:

> I am claiming, for a diverse group of women filmmakers [and critics and theoreticians], an activity that may not be avowedly feminist on their part, but which is part of the feminist rewriting of film history, and of cinematic pleasure and identification. [1990:7]

A Brief History of Feminist Cinema

Historical accounts of women's cinema sometimes neglect to mention women's contributions in the early days of cinema, giving the impression that women didn't begin making films until the late 1960s. In fact, they began right about the same time as men, just prior to the turn of the century. Even though their numbers were far fewer, their accomplishments were on par. Alice Guy, for instance, the world's first woman director, was also, according to some sources, the first director ever of a fiction film. [Kuhn & Radstone 1990:184] Lois Weber, an American actress and director, made -- according to her own estimate -- somewhere between two and four hundred films in a 23-year period. [ibid:418] Esfir Shub was an important Soviet documentary filmmaker through to the end of the 1940s; Dorothy Arzner was the only woman to direct a significant number of films during Hollywood's heyday in the 30s and 40s [ibid:24]; Canadian Nell Shipman co-directed a variety of films between 1915 and 1927; and directors Ida Lupino and Maya Deren developed substantial bodies of work during the 40s and 50s, albeit in very different areas (Lupino in narrative feature films and Deren in avant-garde short films).

There are a number of possible reasons why these women (and many others) are not always mentioned in histories of filmmaking: films get lost or damaged and simply do not survive, male film historians turn a blind eye to women's contributions, etc. However, the most likely reason is that it is difficult to identify a women's filmmaking

tradition when the numbers are spread out so thinly over a long period of time and across a range of styles, nationalities and themes.

It wasn't until the 1960s that greater numbers of women began making films, films that for the first time could be said to constitute a bona fide feminist tradition. Filmmaking technology had by that time become easier to use, and training was more readily available (through university film departments, for instance) for those who wanted to learn. Access was thus assured, although women were still largely confined to documentary modes (as opposed to feature filmmaking). (Some women did manage to gather enough money to make fiction films, although they were the exception rather than the rule.) Uniting these women into a common front was a shared political purpose -- that of rectifying the omissions and distortions of femininity perpetrated by mainstream representations.

Thus, this "first wave" of feminist films came directly out of the women's movement, which was enjoying a second flourishing in the late 60s. These were, as mentioned, documentary films which chronicled the lives of "ordinary" women. A typical such film is *Three Lives*, by Kate Millett (1970), which features three women from diverse backgrounds talking about their lives and experiences as women. These films offered their female spectators pleasures that could not be found in conventional documentaries

(but which, on the other hand, were typical of conventional narrative cinema) --
identification with the women onscreen and with the stories they told.[2]

Feminist documentaries and the new documentary style of the 60s, cinéma vérité, share
many traits: mobile framing and rough focussing (due to the use of hand-held cameras),
and grainy images (fast film stock is required for naturally or minimally-lit sets). Where
they differ from typical cinéma vérité is in their reliance on biographical (if not
autobiographical) material and in the advocacy positions that they took up. [Lesage 1984]
Both of latter strategies represent a politically-informed decision to give women a voice,
to portray them as speaking subjects (as opposed to having someone else speak for them
or not speak of them at all).

Thus, in the early days of an identifiably feminist film culture (the late 1960s and early
1970s), interventions were made mostly at the level of film content. This involved
changing the ways in which women were being represented. It was thought that
substituting stronger and more "realistic" versions of woman, without significantly
changing the forms and stylistic conventions of these representations, would suffice.[3]

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[2]These concepts will be elaborated on in the chapters that follow.

[3]A whole debate emerged in the mid-1970s as to documentary's aspirations to
realism. See, for instance, Eileen McGarry's "Documentary, Realism and Women's
Cinema," *Women & Film* 2:7 (1975), 50-57. I tend to agree with Julia Lesage, however, that
feminist documentaries never had any pretensions to realism or objectivity. Clearly, the
choice of subject matter itself was a strategic political one: the stories told onscreen
"serve[d] a function aesthetically in reorganizing women viewers' expectations derived
from patriarchal narratives and in initiating a critique of those narratives." [Lesage

The simple inversion of sex roles did nothing, however, to challenge the ideological biases underlying the conventions of such representations. By the mid-seventies, feminist film theorists such as Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey had developed a much more discerning understanding of the cinematic apparatus and of its role in inscribing sexual difference. Documentary realism was called into question, and a general mistrust of mainstream film forms set in.

Women therefore began experimenting with new forms of expression, focussing on the language -- rather than the content -- of representation. A feminist formalism emerged, engaging with more complex issues of "representation, [...] the filmic text, the relation of the spectator to the text, the play of language within the text, and the question of the female gaze." [Banning 1987:155] As such, this style of filmmaking was self-consciously oppositional, originating in the desire to create a whole new cinematic language, a countercinema which was only linked to the prevailing system by virtue of its negation of it. It violated all the most precious conventions of dominant cinema, using disjunctive sound/image relationships, direct camera address, still images, intertitles, and skewed time-space relations. Accordingly, conventional pleasures were denied, being replaced by the pleasures of deconstruction and analysis.[4]

1984:236]

[4]See fn. 2 above.

A major body of feminist avant-garde filmwork was developed throughout the 1970s and early 80s by the likes of Sally Potter and Laura Mulvey in Britain, Michelle Citron and Yvonne Rainer in the United States, and Patricia Gruben and Kay Armatage in Canada. Mentioning these filmmakers all within the same sentence might give the reader the impression that there is a unified feminist avant-garde tradition. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The films of Michelle Citron and Yvonne Rainer, for instance, are, stylistically speaking, miles apart. What is important here, however, is that all these women were, each in their own way, exploring entirely new and entirely "other" forms of expression, exploring the possibility of creating a specifically feminine cinematic language.

While these filmmakers can probably be said to have been successful in their attempts at conceiving a "new language of desire" [Mulvey 1975:8], they did so at a cost, that of reaching large numbers of women. Avant-garde films are challenging, especially so for those not versed in film theory. Feminist avant-garde films are doubly unconventional, because they extend the exercise in form to an exploration of the relationship of form to certain very specific contents. As a result, audiences must also be well-acquainted with the discourse of feminism. This limits audience size even further. The unfortunate end result is one of preaching to the converted.

In recognition of this, many avant-garde filmmakers have begun exploring ways of making their films more accessible. In general terms, this involves using structures and

techniques that audiences are more familiar with (for example, better-developed characters and more identifiable story lines, popular formats such as melodrama, etc.) At the same time, however, because misgivings about narrative fiction film have not abated, the filmmakers must find a way of undermining these conventions. This they do by retaining avant-garde and deconstructive elements.

Teresa de Lauretis has picked up on and described this trend in her book, *Technologies of Gender*. In 1979, Laura Mulvey mapped out two successive moments in feminist film culture -- first, documentary practice, which aimed to change the content of filmic representation, and second, avant-garde filmmaking, which was more concerned with cinematic form. [Mulvey 1979:6-7] In 1987, reviewing recent filmmaking developments such as those described above, de Lauretis argues that feminist film practice has reached a new juncture, one marked by a concern with spectatorial address:

> [T]here has been a shift in women's cinema from an aesthetic centered on the text and *its* effects on the viewing or reading subject [...] to what may be called an aesthetic of reception, where the spectator is the film's primary concern -- primary in the sense that it is there from the beginning, inscribed in the filmmaker's project and even in the very making of the film. [1987:141]

Nor is this just any spectator. Films falling into this category, according to de Lauretis, "define [...] all points of identification (with character, image, camera) as female, feminine, or feminist." [ibid:133] Thus, women's films are not only *by* and *about* women, but also *for* women.

While I have outlined this progression in chronological terms in the interests of clarity, it is by no means as neat as I have made it out to be. It is probably more correct to think of the development in dialectical rather than chronological terms. [de Lauretis 1987:119] As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, for instance, women have been working with narrative form all along. Similarly, feminist documentaries and avant-garde films are still being made today. However, it seems that interest is gradually shifting away from these modes towards ones with more audience appeal.

Nor should it be forgotten that the number and prominence of women working in the mainstream feature film industry has increased dramatically in the last ten or fifteen years. Accordingly, so have the number of such films with feminist content.[5] The fascination with narrative is not new; what is is its gradual (yet still not unwary) acceptance within feminist film circles.[6]

Yvonne Rainer is an avant-garde filmmaker who has recently begun to grapple with the problem of accessibility. In the section that follows, I will look at some of the solutions she has come up with. Her current work is in many ways exemplary of this new

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[5]Consider, for example, Anne Wheeler's *Loyalties* and *Bye Bye Blues,* Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts,* Patricia Gruben's *Deep Sleep,* Susan Seidelman's *Desperately Seeking Susan* and *Making Mr. Right,* and Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls.*

[6]Even mainstream narratives directed by men are becoming more palatable to feminist critics, as we shall see in Chapter Three.

filmmaking trend;[7] it thus provides an occasion to consider this aesthetic in more depth, while at the same time focussing the discussion more closely on pleasure and spectatorship. Just as each of the two previous feminist aesthetics put into play their own particular structures of pleasure and spectatorship, so does this one.

Case Study: Yvonne Rainer

In two published articles, Yvonne Rainer outlines a series of personal and aesthetic considerations that have influenced her film practice.[8] And while Rainer's comments relate specifically to her own work, I would suggest that they also characterize much of feminist production. Over the past few years, Rainer has found herself engaging more and more with narrative. At the same time, her films have increasingly incorporated a feminist awareness, going, as she says, from:

> descriptions of individual feminine experience floating free of both social context and narrative hierarchy [*Film About a Woman Who...*], to descriptions of individual feminine experience placed in radical juxtaposition against historical events [*Journeys from Berlin/1971*], to explicitly feminist

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[7]Although as she herself pointed out in 1991, there is no guarantee that she will continue to be a part of this trend.

[8]These are: "More Kicking and Screaming from the Narrative Front/Backwater," *Wide Angle* 7:1-2 (1985), 8-12 and "Some Ruminations around Cinematic Antidotes to the Oedipal Net(les) while Playing with DeLauraedipus Mulvey, or, He May be Off Screen, but...," *The Independent* 9:3 (1986), 22-25.

speculations about feminine experience [*The Man Who Envied Women, Privilege*]. [1985:8][9]

She continues: "I have just formulated an evolution which in becoming more explicitly feminist seems to demand a more solid anchoring in narrative conventions." [1985:8] Rainer does not see the dovetailing of feminism and narrative as a mere coincidence, but as an unexpected indication of the formal constraints dictated by particular contents. This is an interesting suggestion.

She elaborates:

> [A]s my texts become more explicitly theoretical or political, I feel a greater obligation to enclose them in a more totalized narrative and assign their utterances to more unified identities. [1985:9]

By "more unified identities," Rainer means characters about whom many details are furnished and who -- though still not physically present onscreen, since this would signal total concession to mainstream convention -- speak in the first person. Previously, she did her utmost to strip her characters of any identifiable presence or definable features, so as to discourage viewer identification.[10]

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[9]This evolution corresponds to the three moments of feminist film production identified in the first part of this chapter.

[10]As an example of how little is required for the attribution of identity, she recounts a performance piece she once conceived, in which: "[t]wo people at a time, from a group of 10 or more, having hung large signs around their necks, come to the foreground of the performing area to strike ordinary sitting and standing poses with gazes directed toward or away from one another. The signs read variously 'sister,' 'brother,' 'mother,' 'other woman,' 'lover,' 'child,' 'son,' 'friend,' 'husband,' etc. In sequential *tableaux vivants* 'daughter' sits next to 'lover' or 'other woman' stands near 'father' until all of the possible combinations of relationship and intrigue are exhausted." [1985:10]

Rainer has now come to the conclusion that

> the personal, i.e., descriptions of individual daily life, must
> be depersonalized in its transposition to film, while the
> political, i.e., generalizations about social organization, must
> be personalized. [1985:10]

On the surface, it might look as though Rainer is here simply upholding the aesthetic

of dominant cinema, in which issues that are in fact political and generalizable are

treated as uniquely individual. If, however, we take this statement to be referencing the

feminist motto "the personal is political," then an alternate interpretation presents itself:

to represent something as personal is to politicize it. This is especially true for those

films that set out specifically to formulate a more "authentic" viewing position for the

female spectator.[11] With its play upon spectator identification -- a necessarily

individualized experience -- narrative is ideal for this "personalization," and given

feminism's concern with "articulat[ing] the conditions and forms of vision for another

social subject [i.e., woman]" [de Lauretis 1987:134], they could potentially make a good

pair.

But in order not to simply replicate the style of classic cinema and its attendant

shortcomings, identification must be deployed differently, and with caution. Rainer

shrewdly describes the film audience as a "sleeping-tiger audience," because it "dreams

with all its eyes open." [1985:11,10] While undermining identification has never proved

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[11]By "authentic" I mean a viewing position which is more in line with the everyday
experience of women, i.e., representations of woman as the subject and not simply the
object of pleasure.

difficult for Rainer, the thought of inducing it is much more daunting, for "once [the audience] is hooked, how do you unhook [it]...?" [1985:10] The "willful tenacity" of the sleeping-tiger audience must not be underestimated, since

> when faced with even vestigial evidence of narrative time
> and space, it suddenly becomes rampant and demands the
> whole 'mishpucha,' i.e., total psychological coherence at the
> levels of role and image. [1985:11]

The trick is to induce identification deliberately, rather than surreptitiously, so as to frustrate this will-to-coherence on the part of the spectator. Rainer explains:

> If I'm going to make a movie about Oedipus, i.e., Eddy and
> Edy Pussy Foot, I'm going to have to subject him to some
> calculated narrative screw-ups. It's elementary, dear Eddy:
> play with signifiers of desire. [1986:25]

These "screw-ups" might involve any combination of the following: using more than one actor for the same character; juxtaposing incongruous modes of address; playing off different authorial voices so that no one has absolute authority; disrupting the surface of the image by using a variety of film processing techniques (optical printing, bad video transfers and blown-up super 8 intercut with film, etc.); representing woman as narrative voice rather than image; and so on. [1986:25]

Films that successfully use these techniques will be films that construct "uneven development and fit in the departments of consciousness, activism, articulation, and behavior that must constantly be reassessed by the spectator"; they are films "where in every scene you have to decide anew the priorities of looking"; they are films that "allow for periods of poetic ambiguity, only to unexpectedly erupt into rhetoric, outrage, direct

political address or analysis, only to return to a new adventure of Eddy Foot or New Perils of Edy Foot." [1986:25]

I now turn back to de Lauretis, who provides a more detailed explanation of how this contemporary feminist filmmaking aesthetic puts into play entirely new structures of pleasure and spectatorship.

Theoretical Considerations

Thus we have seen a general shift of priorities away from work made *by* women (as in the earlier moments of feminist cinema) to work made *for* women, or, in theoretical terms, away from an aesthetic of the text toward an aesthetic of reception.[12] This has occasioned a concurrent shift in film analysis, whereby the spectator is no longer exclusively construed as a consumer but also as a producer of images. As such, the object of film-narrative theory is no longer

> narrative but narrativity, not so much the structure of narrative (its component units and their relations) as its work and its effects; [...] and it would be less the description of a rhetoric of film narrative than the understanding of narrativity as the structuring and destructuring, even destructive, processes at work in the textual and semiotic relations of spectatorship. [de Lauretis 1987:118]

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[12]One might argue that Hollywood cinema has always taken the audience into account. What is at issue here, however, is not the fact of exchange, but its specific terms and conditions.

A number of conceptualizations of this text/spectator relationship have been proposed, and these will be considered in detail in the following chapters.

In *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema,* Teresa de Lauretis argues that avant-garde cinema turned out to be unsuited to the purposes of feminism, since its repudiation of narrative coherence frustrates the process of subject construction, and thus denies the spectator access to the film's means of production.[13] Narrative cinema, on the other hand, engages the viewer in the production of meaning and subjectivity by playing upon spectator identification. Because the aesthetic of conventional narrative film involves a subordination of form to content, the operation of identification is masked and the spectator is unaware of her complicity in the production of meaning. Contemporary feminist cinema, on the other hand, balances form and content in such a way as to call the spectator's attention to the fact of her collusion, and at the same time to actively encourage it, instead of denying her its pleasures (which is what avant-garde cinema tended to do.) This is why de Lauretis waxes so enthusiastic about Rainer's films (and others like it): because they allow for both emotional and intellectual pleasure. De Lauretis' analysis is essentially the same as Rainer's, in that it calls for the inscription of narrative -- under certain very specific conditions -- as opposed to its total repudiation. Her argument has a more theoretical and political grounding, however, and as such it requires further explanation.

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[13](Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

A basic tenet of feminist film theory has been the notion of the subject as historically constituted, "not just *by* symbolic systems...but *in* the practices of signification and meaning that take place through those systems...." [de Lauretis 1985:35] Thus, cinematic representation can be seen as "a kind of mapping of social vision into subjectivity," whereby each individual cinematic subject participates, to differing degrees, in the production and reproduction of this social imagination. [1985:36] What feminist cinema strives to do then is to ensure that female subjects are given tools adequate to this participation. As elaborated by feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey, avant-garde cinema does not allow the spectator to engage with the image in this way, and mainstream narrative cinema, in representing a skewed image of woman (as the object and not the subject of narrative and pleasure), constructs conditions of female subjectivity that are inevitably circumscribed. What makes contemporary feminist cinema *feminist*, on the other hand, is that it *begins* from an understanding of spectatorship as gendered, it makes a "conscious effort to address the spectator as female, regardless of the gender of the viewers," [de Lauretis 1987:119] thus providing the terms for unmitigated feminine subject-construction and pleasure. In direct contrast to mainstream classic cinema, feminist cinema seeks to effect a feminization of the spectator.

Not content simply to theorize, de Lauretis takes examples of contemporary feminist films,[14] and illustrates how this invocation occurs. These films construct a form of

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[14]In particular, films by Lizzie Borden, Chantal Akerman, and Yvonne Rainer. To these I would add as Canadian examples Ann-Marie Fleming's *New Shoes* and Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*.

coherence that is paradoxically based in contradiction, parallelling the nature of female spectatorship. This coherence is achieved through the various interworkings of plot, narrative, and narrativity, and it is explicitly "self-subverting" [1987:116], in contrast to the total closure which is effected by classic cinema. Films falling under this feminist rubric are ones which, for de Lauretis, "manage to inscribe ... my woman's look -- next to, side by side, together with, my other (cinematic) look" [1987:114], films such as Rainer's which simultaneously proffer and undermine identification by employing strategies of multivocal address.

Jane Weinstock makes an argument similar to de Lauretis', using slightly different terms. She claims that this new cinema "give[s] history a discourse," by presenting each figure as a "linguistic construction." The result is that "with 'discourse', you can't just sit back and watch. Your position as addressee, as voyeur, is evident; you are implicated." The "new 'she'" of this sort of cinema is "two-dimensional", resisting the completeness of her three-dimensional masculine counterpart in classic cinema. The 'you' in the audience replicates the 'she' of the film, "continuing her struggle to expose the conventional while at the same time exploring her own imaginary relation to it." [1984:41-44] This is an almost literal depiction of the project of feminism (at least as conceived by de Lauretis): the examination of the relationship of 'Woman' (a category constructed in and by cultural representation) to 'women' (real historical beings).

Address is thus a crucial component of this new feminist cinema, with specific consequences for the spectator and her pleasure. The use of formal means such as juxtaposing forms of address makes spectator positioning explicit; it militates against the pull of identification and narrativization, while not inhibiting them altogether (hence de Lauretis' pointed use of the term 'coherence' as opposed to 'closure.') As Rainer argues, it is the "state of ignorance of that [positioning] that will permit Oedipus ... in some form or another to do you in." [1986:24] Providing a series of vantage points encourages the formation of a "critical subjectivity"[15] in the viewer, who is incited to make her own decisions as to which discourse or discourses to align herself with. The spectator is made aware of her complicity in the production of meaning and pleasure by this heightened exaggeration of the conditions of spectatorship; she is someone who will have

> given equal attention to the fictions and the production of
> those fictions, to the social relations and to the representation
> of those relations,

and asked herself the following questions:

> In what historical period has the director permitted [the
> characters] to live? What are the director's concerns other
> than making the audience sit on the edge of its seat in fear of
> pleasure? Where is the social reality in this film? [Rainer
> 1985:11]

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[15]This is a term Mary Gentile uses in her book, *Film Feminisms -- Theory and Practice* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985).

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined, in very general terms, the evolution of women's cinema up until the present time. I have devoted considerably more attention to the most recent moment of feminist filmmaking, using Rainer's work as an example, because it deviates so significantly from all the previous ones. Rather than rejecting narrative and/or pleasure outright, as in the past, it toys with them. Focussing on the writings of Rainer, I have identified some of the reasons for this shift. I have also outlined the identifying marks of this new filmmaking aesthetic, paying particular attention to how it puts into play a very specific and unique set of conditions for female spectatorship and pleasure.

At a glance, it might seem as though feminist cinema has come full circle, back to working within the parameters of mainstream film culture. Much has transpired, however, in the intervening moments since the mid-sixties, not only in film theory but also more generally in cultural analysis. As the theory was refined, so was the practice, which, in turn, informed the theory. While feminist cinema might be adopting some of the ways and means of conventional cinema, it is clearly also appropriating them to its own ends. The next two chapters will trace how theory has inspired and been inspired by this new filmmaking practice.

CHAPTER TWO
FEMINIST FILM THEORY AND CRITICISM:
A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Introduction

The following two chapters chart the development of feminist film theory and criticism.

For the purposes of analysis, this tradition can be broken down into three phases,

identifiable by the particular critical methodology employed. These are, in chronological

order: content analysis, textual analysis, and context analysis. These terms are not the

ones always employed; nor is the separation between these methodologies as clear-cut

as the terms might suggest. However, in the name of clarity and expediency, these are

the categories I have adopted. Much like feminist film practice, the progression from one

to the other has been marked by accrual, with each methodology (and attendant

theoretical framework) building and improving upon its antecedent without replacing

it altogether.[1] As the scope of feminist film criticism has broadened, its focus has

become more specific: what began as a generalized description of how women are

represented in cinema has culminated in an investigation into the consequences of this

depiction for individual spectators.

In this chapter, I review content and textual analysis, taking a rather lengthy but

necessary detour through theories of signification, ideology, and psychoanalysis. I then

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[1]Nor have any of these earlier approaches entirely disappeared.

focus my discussion on the joint issues of female spectatorship and pleasure, looking at a few models that have been proposed in this regard. Two questions are addressed in this section: "What is the place of the female spectator in dominant cinema and what kinds of pleasure are available to her?" and, given this, "What is the place of pleasure in feminist film practice?" The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments presented.

The most recent guise of feminist film criticism, characterized by its concern with the context of cultural reception, is still in its infant stages, and as yet there is no one accepted methodology. As such, the whole of Chapter Three is devoted to it. In the meantime, I will introduce some of the key terms and issues of the debates around women and representation.

Content Analysis

Feminist film criticism began in the 1970s as an investigation into the portrayal of women in mainstream cinema. The most well-known of these critics were Molly Haskell and Marjorie Rosen, who both published important volumes in 1973.[2] Haskell and Rosen employed a sociological-empirical approach, loosely grouping films according to type, the historical period in which they were made, or thematic trends, and then categorising the stereotypes of women that prevailed within each of these along positive/negative lines.[3] These images were taken as directly representative of reality, as a kind of yardstick by which society's attitudes toward women could be measured. As Haskell writes, for instance, "movies are one of the clearest and most accessible of looking glasses into the past, being both cultural artifacts and mirrors." [1987:xviii]

While any critique of the onscreen roles of women is welcome, this type of approach is somewhat limited. To begin, the criteria used in the evaluation of roles and images are somewhat simplistic. The findings put forth merely confirm the laywoman's long-held suspicions regarding the negative stereotyping of women in the media, and do not offer

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[2] *From Reverence to Rape* and *Popcorn Venus*, respectively. Other works falling under this rubric include Joan Mellen's *Women and their Sexuality in the New Film* (New York: Dell, 1973); Karyn Kay & Gerald Peary's *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology* (New York: EP Dutton, 1977) and Patricia Erens' *Sexual Stratagems: The World of Women in Film* (New York: Horizon Press, 1979).

[3] Lumping these two critics together might be a tad unfair. Rosen's work leaned in the direction of pop sociology, whereas Haskell made a genuine effort at analysis, incorporating more of a feminist/intellectual perspective. [Kuhn & Radstone 1990]

much in the way of explanation, elaboration or redemption. Because such studies focus predominantly on manifest content, there is little analysis of how these significations are achieved or of how form interacts with content in the production of meaning. Instead, meaning is taken at face value, as immediately apprehendable and, in addition, static over time and from user to user.

Furthermore, the notion of cinema as a transparent window onto reality, of women depicted in cinema as simply stand-ins for the real thing, is a mistaken one. As Eileen McGarry points out, in a fiction film "the pro-filmic event is coded by the ideological perceptions and interpretations of the film workers, and any traditional genre requirements of the form and content." [1975:50][4] There are thus any number of constraints (aesthetic, economic, political, ideological, etc.) operative on cultural production and reproduction, constraints that Rosen in particular fails to take into consideration.[5] Content analysis mistakenly assumes that conditions of both production and reception are uniform for all films. It does not even conceive of the film spectator, and it doesn't tell us anything about cinema as cinema, about the specifics of the form.

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[4]The balance of McGarry's article is concerned with documentary film and its pretensions to realism. However, because Haskell and Rosen primarily review feature fiction films, many of McGarry's arguments do not apply.

[5]Haskell, on the other hand, does frequently reference the Hollywood Production Code, a document outlining the "no-no's of cinema," which unfortunately only served to reinforce conservative notions of femininity. [Haskell 1987:117]

As a methodology, content analysis can have some merit, particularly when it draws from a well-developed theoretical framework.[6] However, Haskell and Rosen are not film theorists -- they are, first and foremost, establishment critics (in that they tended to review mainstream features as opposed to feminist documentaries and avant-garde films), as they had been for a number of years before beginning to incorporate feminist issues into their work. [Rosenberg 1983:104] Feminist film theory was only just emerging at the time, but it remained largely restricted to academic circles. Haskell and Rosen worked within the confines of the mainstream, which -- inevitably, it seems -- upholds a rather simplistic view of the relationship of media and society. Another effect of their status as mainstream critics was that important film work, namely feminist independent and avant-garde films, was ignored, whenever it could not be made to fit into consumer-friendly categories. [Rosenberg 1983:104] The sheer volume of films Haskell and Rosen reviewed belies the comprehensiveness of their research.

Despite their shortcomings, Haskell and Rosen had a significant influence on the subsequent development of feminist film criticism.[7] After all, they did accomplish the formidable task of initiating a discussion of women and film, and establishing its preliminary parameters. While their research clearly pointed up the connections between

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[6]See, for instance, Tessa Perkins' "Rethinking Stereotypes," in *Ideology and Cultural Production*, eds. Michele Barrett, Philip Corrigan, Annette Kuhn, Janet Wolff (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp. 135-159.

[7]For instance, a significant body of literature on women in film noir has arisen, taking up where Haskell's reviews of 40s and 50s films left off.

patriarchal ideology and film texts, it was evident that a more sophisticated model of

this relationship was required. Textual analysis provides us with exactly that.

Textual Analysis

As set out in a *camera obscura* editorial, textual analysis "considers the text (the film) as a dynamic process of the production of meanings, inscribed within the larger context of social relations." ["Feminism and Film" 1976:5] The key terms in this quote immediately set textual analysis apart from content analysis. Indeed, the theoretical framework within which textual analysis operates is far more elaborate than that of content analysis. It combines theories of ideology and of signification with psychoanalytic theories of the subject, furnishing a composite theory and methodology with significant descriptive and interpretive potential. A whole thesis could be devoted to each of the theories that inform textual analysis. What follows is thus very much a simplification -- in the space available I can only outline their broad contours.

a) Semiotics

Semiotics understands that film, or indeed any medium of communication, is a signifying system which is structured like language, in which terms acquire meaning by virtue of their difference with other terms. As elaborated by Ferdinand de Saussure, the elements of this system are called signs.[8] A sign consists of a signifier (its form, a word or an image) and a signified (its content, its meaning). Thus, in cinema we have the sign

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[8]De Saussure's material can be found in *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959).

'woman.' What feminist analysis seeks to do is to deconstruct this sign, to consider which signifiers and signifieds have attached themselves to it and how, and to what end.

Semiotics is, in short, "the study of the operation of signs in society -- that is, of the cultural constitution of processes of meaning construction." [Kuhn 1982:199] Thus, the object of analysis expands to include not only the meanings produced by a particular text (as with content analysis), but also, and more importantly, the process whereby these significations are achieved. Being culturally constituted, signification becomes a function of ideology. In uncovering the process of meaning production, then, semiotic textual analysis also uncovers the operation of ideology. [ibid:77]

However, a defining characteristic of ideology is that it works to conceal its own operation. [Kuhn 1982:77, citing Barthes] This is especially evident in the case of dominant cinema, where conventions or signifying practices (such as continuity editing) abound which give films the appearance of being neutral reflections of reality. Feminist textual analysis attempts to counteract the naturalizing function of patriarchal ideology by uncovering the ways in which such signifying practices operate in the construction of the image of woman. It is, in short, a method of textual deconstruction.

b) Althusser on Ideology

In addition to semiotics, feminist textual analysis also draws on the work of Louis Althusser, and in particular, his reformulation of the theory of ideology.[9] As Althusser defines it, ideology is "a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," [1971:152] and it is disseminated through a variety of cultural institutions (what he calls 'ideological state apparatuses'), the mass media not least among them. The effect of ideology, according to Althusser, is to constitute human beings as unified subjects, by providing them with a set of images with which to make sense of the world. These images are in fact idealized and "imaginary," but are made to appear natural and free of contradiction through the operation of ideology. The subjectivities that they work to construct are thus themselves based in misrecognition:

> The human subject is de-centred, constituted by a structure
> which has no 'centre' either, except in the imaginary
> misrecognition of the 'ego', i.e., in the ideological formations
> in which it 'recognizes' itself. [Althusser 1971:218-219]

The aim, therefore, of the ideological analysis of cultural texts is to identify this "structure of misrecognition" [Althusser 1971:219], to isolate the forms and ways in which ideology manifests and reproduces itself. Specifically, this involves examining the

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[9]As outlined in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971).

way in which individuals are interpellated or hailed as subjects by texts.[10] Since by Althusser's definition subjectivity entails meaning-making, this can be determined by considering how the subject is positioned within the meaning-production process of the text.

Subject positioning occurs in a number of ways. The narrative point-of-view most frequently employed in dominant cinema is what Tzvetan Todorov calls the 'view from behind,' where the spectator -- unlike the characters in the story -- is placed in a privileged position of knowledge. Other possibilities include the 'view with' and the 'view from outside.' [Kuhn 1982:52] Even though a film might incorporate some combination of narrative viewpoints, the knowledge of the text will still have been selected and structured so as to fit into one particular perspective or another. Furthermore, because of the naturalizing function of ideology, meaning is made to appear as if it were 'already there', residing innocently in the text. As such, the strategic positioning of the viewing subject in relation to signification is not readily apparent. [Kuhn 1982:52][11]

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[10]Althusser illustrates this notion by way of example: interpellation "can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, [s]he becomes a *subject*." [1971:163] The notion of speech as constitutive of subjectivity is developed further in the section on Lacan.

[11]According to Christian Metz, cinematic discourse operates on one of two registers: *histoire* and *discours*. *Histoire* is defined as "that mode of address characteristic of narrations of past events, in which the narrator is not foregrounded as a 'person'.... In *discours*, on the other hand, every utterance inscribes both a speaker ('I') and a hearer

c) <u>Lacanian Psychoanalysis</u>

Althusser borrowed his theory of the subject from Jacques Lacan, contextualizing it within a broader discussion of ideology; Lacan, in comparison, was more concerned with the specifically psychic processes of subject formation. Taking up and moving beyond Freud's work on the Oedipus complex, Lacan locates the development of the human subject within a linguistic rather than biological model.[12] Relations of looking also figure prominently in Lacan's framework. Both of these factors make his work particularly adaptable to the study of film.

Lacan organizes the development of the subject around two orders of experience: the imaginary and the symbolic. The imaginary is the order which governs the subject's experience of itself as whole; the symbolic, on the other hand, is predicated upon the subject's recognition and internalization of difference. The movement between these two orders of experience is marked both visually and linguistically.

The imaginary is best exemplified by the mirror phase, during which subjectivity is originally constituted. This occurs when the infant first catches sight of its own image reflected in the mirror. What the child sees in the reflection is a more coherent version

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('you'), so that 'person' is present throughout.... [D]iscours foregrounds subjectivity in its address, while in histoire address is impersonal." Kuhn argues that histoire is a defining feature of dominant cinema. [Kuhn 1982:49,53]

[12]Lacan's best-known work is Ecrits (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966).

of itself, an ideal image, with which it identifies. A sense of self or subjectivity emerges from this identification, but it is founded on misrecognition and misapprehension. The subject at this point has no conception of itself as separate from or lesser than the other -- the unity it experiences is "imaginary."

Subjectivity is constituted further through speech acts, once the child enters the symbolic order. As the child begins to acquire language, and to use the terms "I" and "You," it learns to operationalize the distinction between subject and object. Every time the child uses "I", in other words, it affirms its identity as distinct from anyone else's. [Kuhn 1982:46] In this way, the subject begins to conceive of itself as part of a network of relationships structured by difference, rather than as a unique entity unto its own. [Nichols 1981:32]

The formation of the unconscious is concurrent with the constitution of the subject, and is produced in the same manner, i.e., through the acquisition of language. In representing itself through symbolic means, the subject relinquishes the sense of wholeness that characterizes the imaginary field. This, and a whole series of other repressions -- that language, predicated as it is upon difference, effects in the subject -- is what the unconscious is made up of. The very fact that the unconscious exists, in other words, is evidence that the subject is not unitary. [Kuhn 1982:48]

The most significant type of difference in this regard is sexual difference, the awareness of which is crucial to the formation of gendered subjectivity. For Lacan, like Freud, sexual difference is indicated for the child by the mother's lack of a penis. In the realm of language, this originary difference comes to be symbolized by the phallus, which acts as a kind of transcendental signifier. The phallus, in other words, takes on the symbolic properties of the penis, and assumes its role, in language, as signifier of difference. The male child's entry into the symbolic is less problematic than the female's: he has the penis, and with it comes the ability to represent it as phallus. This is not to say that woman is entirely excluded from representation, but she is from the outset relegated to the status of other, and this makes her subjectivity all the more difficult to achieve.

Within psychoanalytic film theory, Lacan's model of subject development is taken as representative of the cinematic subject. The spectator's subjectivity, in other words, is similarly formed through unconscious processes, and once again relations of looking and representation figure prominently. The cinema, for instance, evokes the world of the imaginary, proffering reflections "in which the self [i.e., the viewing subject] can (mis)recognise itself, social reality, and its place within that reality." [Lovell 1980:41] The misrecognition in this case is effected by ideology, which, as we saw above, works to construct a unified subject. Ideology, in other words, affects us at the level of the unconscious. As a result, it does so in ways which are not immediately manifest.

Psychoanalytic methods aimed at uncovering hidden or repressed meanings can be applied to film texts in an attempt to reveal the ideological operations embedded within them [Kuhn 1982:78] — a practice that several critics have referred to as 'making visible the invisible.' This involves a consideration of how the image of woman is constructed onscreen, and in particular how this construction has been informed by patriarchal ideology. These discussions centre around the way in which dominant cinema consistently represents woman as object, and not subject, of the look, thereby replicating woman's "difficult" relationship to the symbolic.

In addition to providing strategies for textual deconstruction, psychoanalysis is used as a means of elucidating the text/ spectator relationship. Most often, film theorists draw upon psychoanalysis to explain the "effects" of the text on the spectator; it is only as of very recently that the effects of the spectator on the text are being considered. Feminist-psychoanalytic textual analysis is concerned specifically with the representations of women and the psychic structures they evoke in the spectator. Laura Mulvey initiated this particular discussion, framing it around the joint questions of pleasure and sexual difference. Let us now look at what she has to say.

Pleasure and Female Spectatorship: A Review

Mulvey's mapping of spectatorship and pleasure, as well as her vision of feminist film practice, have been the source of considerable discussion. The parameters of the feminist debate around pleasure have been largely set by her; I have therefore chosen to begin my literature review with her and to devote -- at least initially -- more time to her arguments. Throughout the review, I will be dealing on the one hand with theorizations of feminine spectatorial pleasure, and on the other with their perceived bearing on feminist film practice.

Reviewing every feminist film critic's position on spectatorship and pleasure would comprise a thesis in itself. Laura Mulvey, Claire Johnston, Mary Ann Doane and Teresa de Lauretis are arguably the leading figures of feminist film theory,[13] and their writings epitomize the range of views on this topic (at least for those that fall under the textual analysis rubric). Being the first to engage with the issue of pleasure, Mulvey's article is the most polemical. As she herself admits in 1985, confrontation must be followed by creativity. [1989a:161] The work of the other three authors in this review can be seen in this light, rather than as an outright rejection of Mulvey's program.

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[13]Kaja Silverman, Annette Kuhn and E. Ann Kaplan might be added to this list; here, however, they have been used only as secondary sources.

a) Models of spectatorship and pleasure

In her 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"[14] Mulvey argues that dominant cinema constructs a male spectator, regardless of the actual sex of the viewer. It does so by mobilizing structures of looking, both pleasurable and unpleasurable, that are organized around a masculine desire; these are scopophilia proper (the pleasure in looking at others as objects) and its derivative, narcissistic scopophilia (the pleasure in looking at the likeness of oneself). The "active/passive heterosexual division of labour" [1975:12] which obtains in mainstream representation is such that woman is the (passive) object of the look, and man its (active) subject.

Mulvey contends that woman as image "induces voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms." [1975:17] This is because, in the oedipal scenario, she connotes castration. Thus, although "pleasurable in form," the look can be "threatening in content" [1975:11]. This displeasure is circumvented in one of two ways, either by turning her into a fetish object, so that her castration is masked and thus denied, or by asserting control over her by subjecting her (within the structure of the narrative) to intense scrutiny, demystifying her enigma, and ultimately punishing her.

At each and every turn, then, narrative fiction film insists upon woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness," while maintaining a pretense of realism. As Mulvey points out, the conventions

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[14]*Screen* 16:3 (1975), 6-18.

of classic cinema are such that the look of the camera and of the audience are disavowed, so that the spectator has the impression of being an innocent bystander to the drama unfolding onscreen. In actual fact, the cinematic spectacle is very much tailored to the desires of its viewers: "the camera 'looks' the viewer as subject" [Silverman 1983:223], unobtrusively producing subject positions and visual perspectives with which he identifies and which afford him pleasure.

In a later essay, Mulvey addresses the implications of her model of spectatorship and pleasure for the female viewer.[15] Here she shifts her focus somewhat, discussing pleasure as an effect of narrative structures rather than visual ones. Taking as her example female-centered melodramas, and drawing a parallel between the predicament of the woman onscreen and the women in the audience,[16] she depicts female spectatorship as unstable, oscillating between active (masculine) and passive (feminine) identifications. According to Freud's model of sexual development, girls pass through an active masculine phase which must be repressed before attaining femininity. Transsex identification is thus not unfamiliar to women. Popular narratives reanimate these identifications, enacting the female spectator's fantasy of masculine omnipotence. This

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[15]"Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by 'Duel in the Sun'," *Framework* 15-18 (1981), 12-15.

[16]If this equivalence seems tenuous, see Gloria Steinem on the curious coincidence between Hollywood actresses' personal lives and the masochistic scenarios they acted out on film: "Women in the Dark: Of Sex Goddesses, Abuse, and Dreams," *Ms.* 1:4 (1991), 35-37.

pleasure is ultimately tempered by the fact that these are male personifications of desire that must, in the end, be renounced in favour of 'correct' femininity.

Mary Ann Doane's work on the "woman's film" confirms the impracticability of employing feminine structures of address and desire in dominant cinema.[17] By definition, desire must have an object; the problem for woman, as she is culturally constructed, is that she *is* object, and as such all she can desire is the "desire to desire." Even a genre explicitly concerned with woman as desiring subject evinces this difficulty, leaving Doane somewhat pessimistic about the opportunities for female spectatorship and pleasure.

Lacking the necessary distance between herself and her image, the female spectator cannot partake in voyeurism or fetishism unless she assumes a masculine position; her only other options are a kind of radical narcissism (becoming her own object of desire) or masochistic over-identification. [1982:87] Both these latter options are predicated on proximity to the image-object, and thus, Doane maintains, work to "deny the woman the space of a reading." [1987:19] A female gaze is permitted in the woman's film, but it is ultimately chastened or disabled, with the narratives almost always involving some form of punishment for the female protagonist (be it separation, illness, injury, or death.) This effectively precludes the possibility of an empowering female subjectivity.

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[17]See her book, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

Doane does locate a few occasions where female subjectivity escapes censure: these are instances of "double mimesis" [1987:181] or masquerade, in which the female protagonist's rendition of femininity is exaggerated, flaunted, and made strange so that it becomes "*fantastic*, literally *incredible*." [1987:180] The incredulity of the spectator impedes identification, and the image thus becomes "manipulable, producible, and readable," [1982:87] and therefore pleasurable. Here the pleasure is unconventional: it is not the spectator's identity *tout court* that is being corroborated, but her identity-as-construct.

Teresa de Lauretis does not view the predicament of the female spectator (how to "be entertained as subject of the very movement that places her as its object" [1984:141]) as an impossible one, as does Doane. What *is* impossible for de Lauretis is female spectatorship as Mulvey has laid it out. The female spectator cannot, she argues, alternate between identifying with the look and with the image because they are mutually dependent. ("[N]o image can be identified, or identified with, apart from the look that inscribes it as image, and vice versa." [1984:143]) If female spectatorship were indeed limited to this oscillation, the viewer would be left "stranded," her identifications either unrealized or entirely masculine. [1984:144]

In de Lauretis' model, narrative identifications overlay visual ones, organizing the visible into something more coherent for the viewer. [1984:67,144,151] Unlike the first, this second set of identifications is not split, but doubled. Here, the female spectator

identifies with both the subject of the narrative movement and the image of the narrative, concurrently.[18] It is no longer a matter of one or the other but of both positions of desire: desire for the other and the desire to be desired by the other.[19] Rather than a lack of pleasure, then, there is a "surplus" of it for the female spectator. The payoff for consenting to gender is access to other desires and pleasures, ones that outstrip ideology.[20]

b) The Place of Pleasure in Feminist Film Practice

An offshoot to the critique of pleasure in dominant cinema is the question of its place in feminist film practice. Since Mulvey's article decrying the use of pleasure first appeared, there has been much debate on this issue. While initially repudiated as ideologically complicit, pleasure's critical potential is gradually coming to be recognized. It isn't until methods for context analysis are developed that pleasure really comes into its own. Those most apt to uphold its value are those who -- in their analyses of

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[18]Although simultaneous, these identifications are not necessarily equivalent in intensity. The female spectator, for instance, tends ("more often than not") to identify more strongly with the narrative image. [1984:144]

[19]Normally this double desire is not sustained through to the end of the film; rather it is rendered impossible, "resolved" by "either the massive destruction or the territorialization of women." [1984:155]

[20]This is implied rather than stated outright by de Lauretis. Linda Dittmar provides a provocative expansion on de Lauretis' ideas in "Beyond Gender and Within It: The Social Construction of Female Desire," *Wide Angle* 8:3-4 (1986), 79-88.

mainstream films -- have managed to find instances of it working in the female spectator's favour. They want these incidental pleasures made deliberate.

In 1975, however, Mulvey was nowhere near so hospitable. Concluding that narrative cinema could not procure anything other than voyeuristic (dis)pleasure, she called for its destruction, being neither "in favour of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, nor of intellectualised unpleasure." [1975:8] She urged filmmakers to "conceive a new language of desire" [1975:8] predicated on something other than voyeuristic looking and narrative closure.[21] At the time, this involved developing a "politically and aesthetically avant-garde cinema" [1975:8] along the lines of Mulvey's own *Riddles of the Sphinx,* which offered up instead the pleasures of deconstruction; now, however, Mulvey is less scornful of narrative form.[22]

The following year, Claire Johnston argued that "voyeuristic pleasure itself cannot be eliminated from the cinema; indeed, it is vital for the cinema's survival and its development as a political weapon." [1985:317] She agrees with Mulvey that women's cinema should "embody the working through of [female] desire" [1979:143]; where she differs is in her conviction that this can (and indeed must) be achieved within a narrative

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[21]As we saw in Chapter One, these are two "rules" that feminist cinema still abides by, even when exploring narrative form.

[22]See her "Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience" in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 159-176.

format. Entertainment (i.e., pleasure)[23] and politics are not mutually exclusive for Johnston; on the contrary, the one is essential to the other. Recognition and identification are "political strategies" [1980:27]; the task of women's cinema is to "displace and undermine" [1985:325] the symbolic rather than forsake it.

Like Johnston, Doane endorses the displacement of pleasure rather than its eradication. Pleasure is permissible in feminist film practice as long as it is engendered self-consciously; to this end, she advocates using mimicry or double mimesis as a "political textual strategy" [1987:182] that will work to "expos[e] the habitual meanings/values attached to femininity as cultural constructions." [1981:25] This should not diminish the intensity of pleasure for the viewer, but it will shift it into the realm of fantasy, where it properly belongs. [1987:182-183]

Just as Doane does, de Lauretis takes the "accidents" of dominant cinema as inspiration for feminist film practice. The "duplicity," "contradiction," and "ambivalence" of female desire need not be resolved (as it is in Hollywood cinema), but simply emphasized. [1984:153-156] If protracted long enough, de Lauretis reasons, contradiction can destabilize the dominant order. [1984:153,69] Thus, women's cinema should be "narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance," [1984:157] in the hopes of dislodging the conventional structure of female desire. Narrative and visual pleasure, she notes, are not ideological

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[23]Johnston's position on counter-cinema was laid out in 1973, before 'pleasure' had entered the critical lexicon. I can only infer that this is what she meant by 'entertainment.'

in and of themselves; they should therefore not be destroyed but mobilised for feminist ends. [1984:68] Feminist cinema will then be -- as for Johnston -- both critical and erotic. [1990:14]

Analysis

a) Spectatorship and Pleasure

Some important differences and points of comparison between these authors need to be highlighted. Both Mulvey and Doane take as their starting point a masculine gaze, which the female spectator can access only if she assumes some form of disguise (transvestism or masquerade.) Female pleasure, in other words, is subsumed under and complicit with male pleasure. De Lauretis, on the other hand, outlines a more fluid model of spectatorship, where male and female -- as well as non-gendered[24] -- pleasures are equally available. These differences aside, for all these authors spectatorship is more complicated for the female than the male, and the structures of identification available to the female spectator always somehow include a masculine position. [Doane 1987:7]

While this might be true for classic narrative cinema, it need not be the case for a feminist filmmaking aesthetic. Indeed, this could be a measure by which to evaluate

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[24]After Dittmar (see fn. 18 above).

feminist cinema. All of the filmmaking strategies proposed above are valid; no one is any better than the other. In fact, they have all been at one time or another successfully put into practice.[25] [26] De Lauretis' is the most ambitious of these, her goal being no less than the constitution of a different social subject.

With the exception of Mulvey, the authors considered here eschew strict either/or type oppositions, espousing instead a "both/and" philosophy. Underlying this thinking is the position that feminism must critique both from within and from without, at one and the same time [de Lauretis 1984:15], in deference to women's contradictory positioning in society (women are constructed in patriarchy, but they also construct themselves outside of it.) This duality is manifest on a variety of levels: in Doane's notion of masquerade, de Lauretis' double identification, and Johnston's vision of feminist cinema as pleasurable *and* political. The concurrence of the two elements in the both/and equation is not tension-free; indeed, the tension should effect a displacement, a shifting of norms, and ultimately open up a space in which new meanings and pleasures can be created.[27]

[25]See Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

[26]There will probably be at least as many versions as there are feminisms. As de Lauretis puts it, "an all-purpose feminist frame of reference does not exist, nor should it ever come prepackaged and ready-made." [1986:14]

[27]Judith Mayne concedes that the both/and stance can be risky, potentially resulting in either "vague pluralism" or "naive ambiguity." [1990:25] This simply underscores the need for feminism to be self-critical (see below).

Barbara Creed's research on pornography and pleasure is interesting in this regard.[28]

Porn flicks, she notes, don't proffer much in the way of spectator identification, nor do

they rely on suspense. She argues that the absence of these mechanisms gives the

spectator space within which to "construct his or her own scenarios of desire" [1983:78],

and further that this space

> is as necessary to the construction of pleasure for the
> spectator of the pornographic text as the opposite structure,
> the absence of such a space, is necessary for the spectator to
> derive pleasure from the classic narrative text. [1983:78]

Feminist narrative film texts, I would argue, lie somewhere in between these two

extremes, combining their features according to the both/and principle. Structures of

identification and suspense are used but are simultaneously undermined; the spectator

can experience both authorized pleasures and illicit ones[29] without having to choose

between them. Herein lies the originality of feminist narrative cinema as compared to

its mainstream equivalent which, as we have seen, invokes purely conventional

pleasures.

While pleasure has generally "bec[o]me a flag to rally around," [Bergstrom and Doane

1989:8] calls for caution are still heard intermittently. Doane, for instance, writes in 1989

that

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[28]Barbara Creed, "Pornography and Pleasure: The Female Spectator," *Australian Journal of Screen Theory* 15/16 (1983), 67-88.

[29]See Chapter Four for an elaboration of these two kinds of pleasure.

> 'pleasure' [...] has become an unthought term -- signifying
> that which is in excess of ideology, immediately graspable
> and unquestioningly desirable. [...] But why should
> 'pleasure,' as such, be a political goal? [1989:144-145]

Judith Williamson is equally wary of those "undercurrents of resistance [i.e., pleasure] [that] are currently being found by feminist intellectuals in almost every part of feminine culture." [1986a:14] Take, for instance, Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment's collection, *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*,[30] a suspiciously upbeat celebration of such dubiously feminist products and role models as Joan Collins and *Lace*, a blockbuster soft-core porn novel. I too am wary of pleasure and resistance being equated unthinkingly. Seiter et al remind us that "there is nothing inherently progressive about pleasure." [1989:5][31] At the very least, feminist film criticism has been able to demonstrate that there is nothing inherently regressive about it either. What these comments amount to is a warning not to take pleasure for granted. Periodic stocktakings are in order. As we shall see, context analysis is well-suited to this task.

b) Textual Analysis

The models of spectatorship presented here are limited in at least one important respect. The spectator conceived by textual analysis is not the spectator in the theatre; s/he is a

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[30](London: The Women's Press, 1988).

[31]Here they are referring specifically to television studies, which has adopted -- seemingly uncritically -- the methods, values, and assumptions of contemporary film theory, including the wholehearted endorsement of pleasure.

psychic subject. So what of the social subject, the person sitting in the audience? Do women necessarily take up the female spectatorial position? Are men locked into masculine identifications? Textual analysis, as used by feminist film criticism, has not normally been applied to the question of the relationship between the social and psychic subject.

Furthermore, while psychoanalysis recognizes that sexual difference plays a crucial role in the formation of the subject, it is unable to account for other, equally important forms of difference, such as class, race, and sexual orientation. The oedipal scenario is indiscriminate, applying uniformly across cultures and generations. In text-theory terms, this means that all readers/viewers are positioned by a text in the same way, regardless of historical and social context. This uniformity precludes the possibility of theorizing alternative, variable or even multiple readings of a cultural text, and it is inconsistent with a feminism that recognizes and privileges diversity among women.

It also suggests that the ideology of patriarchy is monolithic and all-determining. If the meanings of a film "reflect/remake the ideologies of the culture from which it springs," [Pribram 1988:3] it then becomes difficult to envisage alternatives. Had patriarchy been theorized as simply dominant, and therefore coexisting with other ideologies, the opportunities to resist or subvert it might have been more apparent. No wonder Mulvey (and many others) beat a hasty retreat from the mainstream aesthetic.

These speculations about ideology are mostly implicit in the work of the authors discussed above. De Lauretis constitutes the exception in this regard; her work consistently positions the question of film spectatorship within the larger context of cultural consumption.[32] She has developed a rigorous theorization of the social

> as a field of forces ... , where individuals, groups, or classes move about assuming variable positions, exercising at once power and resistance from innumerable points defined by constantly shifting relations... Groups form and dissolve, relations of power are not fixed and egalitarian, but multiple and mobile. [1984:86]

Within this framework, then, feminist criticism and practice will chart the ways in which one of these groups, namely women, both resist and succumb to dominant ideology. Pleasure is a useful indicator of this negotiation process.

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[32]While Doane's *The Desire to Desire* does draw connections between film spectatorship and female consumerism, it is concerned with a specific historical period and does not discuss the theory of ideology except in very general terms.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the history of the first fifteen years or so of feminist film theory and criticism. Undertaking such a review has allowed me to identify the key concepts and issues in the debate around women and filmic representation. These are, briefly, sexual difference and its role in the construction of the subject; and, in this same regard, the function of the cinematic gaze and of pleasure and identification.

Laura Mulvey's analysis of spectator positioning did not hold out much promise for the female spectator. Fortunately other models of spectatorship have been (and are continuing to be) developed that are not as discouraging in that they allow for at least limited female pleasures. And as far as pleasure's place in feminist film practice goes, again a whole range of positions have been articulated. Apart from Mulvey, all the other critics discussed in this chapter advocate that pleasure be used self-consciously -- that it still be deployed, in other words, but conspicuously instead of surreptitiously.

If pleasure *is* to be used purposefully, a new analytical approach that can both accommodate and account for it is required. It is time to move beyond hypothetical accounts of spectator positioning and pleasure to actual, in-the-field investigations. Feminist inquiry should now turn to exploring the relationship between Woman -- a category of representation -- and women -- the real historical subjects that engage with those representations. Preliminary attempts have been made in this regard; these are

considered in detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE
NEW DIRECTIONS FOR FEMINIST FILM THEORY AND CRITICISM

<u>Introduction</u>

The theories of reception to be discussed in this chapter all share the same basic premise: that there is no necessary, one-to-one correspondence between the subject positions constructed by a text and those actually assumed by the consumers of that text. As we saw in Chapter One, this dichotomous relationship has found material expression in contemporary feminist narratives (viz., the preponderance of parallel, non-converging viewpoints); what concerns us here however are the ways in which this relationship has been theorised. We will follow roughly the same course as the previous chapter, looking at selected models of the spectator/text relation and paying particular attention to how pleasure is (or is not) configured within them. Ultimately, my purpose is to translate the theory of pleasure into a practical politics. This will be tackled in the final chapter.

The theoretical and applied writings that I have grouped together in this chapter all attempt in some way or another to import the methods and insights of cultural studies into feminist film criticism. This chapter doesn't purport to be a comprehensive review of what I will call, for the moment, feminist cultural film studies. On the contrary, it is an admittedly selective introduction to some of its methods and arguments.

Reception theory is relatively recent -- at least as applied to feminism and film -- and its kinks are still being very much worked out. Feminist cultural studies critics have been investigating other popular cultural practices for some time now. Ethnographic studies of romance novel readers and of television viewers abound,[1] but the pickings on film are pretty slim. There is as yet no one accepted methodology for this type of film studies; I have simply chosen the versions that I find the most productive and provocative, as well as the most salient to a theory of pleasure. The frameworks presented here are treated as very preliminary explorations of the field. If I am somewhat critical of these models, it is because they need some fine-tuning. Some of these authors, for instance, don't even mention pleasure, or if they do, they do so very much in passing. Instead of duplicating this omission, I attempt to rectify it. This new approach has not yet jelled into a coherent theory and is to be taken very much as a work-in-process.

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[1]For literature, see, for instance, Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1982); and Linda Christian-Smith's *Becoming A Woman Through Romance* (Routledge: New York and London, 1990). And for TV studies: Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985); and Andrea Press, *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

The Contribution of Cultural Studies

Cultural studies emerged as an analytical strategy in Britain in the 1960s and has only

recently become influential in North American communication studies. Richard Johnson,

in his definitional treatment, "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?",[2] describes its central

tenets as follows:

> The first is that cultural processes are intimately connected
> with social relations.... The second is that culture involves
> power and helps to produce asymmetries in the abilities of
> individuals and social groups to define and realise their
> needs.... [T]he third is that culture is neither autonomous nor
> an externally determined field, but a site of social differences
> and struggles. [1983:11]

Put more briefly, cultural studies is concerned with the ways in which specific social

groups, especially subordinate ones, contest and negotiate power relations through

cultural practices. [Schwichtenberg 1989b:202-203]

Cultural studies is becoming the chosen mode of analysis within feminist film studies

precisely because of this conception of culture as a site of ideological negotiation. If we

recall, textual analysis used the Althusserian version of ideology as monolithic and all-

determining. This meant that opportunities for resistance were limited, if not impossible.

Cultural studies updates this version with a less rigid model that allows for the existence

of both dominant *and* subordinate ideologies. Here, dominant ideology is not self-

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[2](Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1983).

contained but open to the influence of subordinate ideologies. After Antonio Gramsci, it is hegemonic, subject to constant redefinition and negotiation. According to this view, then, ideology is not totally determining and resistance can be accommodated.

The creation of a dominant ideology involves a certain amount of struggle and tension in that consent by subordinate groups has to be shaped and won. This shaping of consent takes place largely at the level of popular culture. The struggle over ideology is, in other words -- as feminism has amply demonstrated -- essentially a struggle over representation, over who has access to what representations.

According to Stuart Hall, this struggle can take many forms: incorporation, distortion, resistance, negotiation and recuperation. [Hall 1981:236] Although not totally determining, ideology always strives to besome so. Dominant ideology in particular is unswerving in its attempts to defuse the power of oppositional ideologies. It does so through a process of recuperation, such that images or ideas once considered radical or threatening are brought into the fold and made to appear harmless.[3] Thus, what is oppositional at one moment can become highly conventional the next. The cultural process is dialectical and ever-changing; strategies of containment and resistance are continually being deployed.[4]

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[3]Take, for instance, the oft-referenced "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" cigarette advertising campaign, a simultaneous nod to and recuperation of feminism.

[4]In their inclusion of dual perspectives (both conventional and oppositional), contemporary feminist narratives anticipate and to some extent forestall this recuperative

Cultural studies research seeks to determine, for any given moment and cultural form, what shape this struggle takes and what it consists of. There is then a good deal of emphasis placed on cultural consumption -- on how a cultural product is actually used, in what context, and on what sorts of meanings are created in the process. Thus, in contrast to the interpretive semiotic strategies of textual analysis, cultural studies employs ethnographic and empirical research methods.[5]

While cultural studies is equipped to approach the question of consumption from a variety of perspectives, it has most often focussed on issues of class.[6] It wasn't until the Women's Studies Group was formed in 1978 that gender was introduced as an equally significant category of analysis.[7] More recently, a number of other categories (e.g., race, sexual orientation, age, etc.) have also come to the fore. In what follows, we will look at a sampling of such studies.

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process.

[5]This distinction is not quite so neat for feminist cultural studies. Possibly because of the influence of feminist film theory, feminist cultural studies seems to be leaning more and more towards combining ethnography and semiotics. Certainly this is the case in film studies, as we shall see, but a number of such studies of other popular cultural practices have appeared of late. Leslie Roman's ethnography of the punk slam dance utilizes semiotic analytical strategies [Roman 1988], as does Linda Christian-Smith's investigation of teen romance novels [Christian-Smith 1990].

[6]See, for instance, *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, eds. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson, 1976) and Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour: How Working-Class Kids Get Working-Class Jobs* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1977).

[7]Angela McRobbie deserves most of the credit here. In 1976, she published the first of a long series of articles focussing on the popular cultural experiences of girls and women. [1976, 1978, 1980, 1982a, and more]

Feminist Cultural Film Studies: Version #1

Jacqueline Bobo is one of only a few scholars to engage in ethnographic research of film audiences, this kind of work being most frequently applied to television. And while parallels can certainly be drawn between television and film viewing, there are at least as many differences.[8] In the interests of conciseness, I will therefore steer pretty well clear of the research on TV audiences. If I do invoke it, it will only be in passing.

Bobo's case study of black women's responses to *The Color Purple* (the film version) challenges the heretofore dominant assumption that viewers of mainstream cinema play no active part in the signification process.[9] If this were indeed the case everyone would read a text in pretty much the same way. However, this film met with a whole range of responses. Through in-depth interviews and a review of published articles, Bobo found that black women -- unlike their male counterparts -- generally discovered something progressive and useful in the film. [1988:95]

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[8]This is compounded by the consideration that "television ... is not one thing. However you choose to look at it -- as, for example, addressing only the delivery side, public/commercial, cable/broadcast/satellite, national/international/local/regional; or in terms of genre, programming, marketing -- it is clear that there are many different televisions." [Kuhn 1989:215]

[9]Jacqueline Bobo, "*The Color Purple*: Black Women as Cultural Readers," in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. Deidre Pribram (London, New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 90-109.

Situating her findings within the theory of cultural negotiation, Bobo argues that members of a marginalized group -- such as these women -- take an oppositional stance when they participate in mainstream culture, due to their varied histories as cultural subjects.[10] They do not, in other words, "leave [their] histories, whether social, cultural, economic, racial, or sexual at the door." [1988:96] These histories form a part of the viewer's cultural competency, which Bobo defines as "the repertoire of discursive strategies, the range of knowledge, that a viewer brings to the act of watching a film and creating meaning from a work." [1988:102-103]

Bobo attributes her respondents' favorable reactions to *The Color Purple* to their particular cultural competency. Noting that there has been something of a renaissance of black women writers of late, Bobo contends that the increase in the number of well-founded images of blacks has given black women the tools with which to construct more affirmative meanings for themselves. [1988:103] Not only that, but the women Bobo interviewed have put these reconstructed meanings to political use, by banding together to work for social change.[11] [1989b:101] This is precisely the intention of feminist critical

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[10]Here she is referring to Stuart Hall's model of the communication process, in which there are three potential responses to a media message: dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. An oppositional response is defined as "one in which the recipient of the text understands that the system that produced the text is one with which she/he is fundamentally at odds." [Bobo 1988:96]

[11]This last point is documented more fully in Bobo's dissertation, "Articulation and Hegemony: Black Women's Response to the Film *The Color Purple*" (University of Oregon, 1989a).

practice: to effect what Stuart Hall calls an articulation, in which old ideologies are reconstituted and cultural transformation takes place. [Bobo 1989b:102]

The strength of Bobo's model (and of cultural studies approaches in general) is its conception of the social as variously textured, involving the participation and negotiation of a number of groups, disenfranchised and privileged alike. It allows that meaning is negotiated according to social, sexual, class, race, and gender affiliations.[12] Bobo also compares the responses of black men and women to the film. Although this comparison is only cursory, it does provide the reader with a sense of perspective.

However, Bobo's model is not as adept as one would hope in accounting for the role that the text plays in delimiting and inflecting the range of meanings to be negotiated. The textual analysis she does offer (and this only in her dissertation and not in her published article) is somewhat superficial, leaning more towards a categorisation of positive and negative images than to a complex, shot-by-shot semiotic analysis. This is in fact characteristic of many context analysis-type studies, as we shall see.

A further consequence of this slighting of textual analysis is that the analysis of pleasure is to some extent forsaken. The closest Bobo gets to pleasure is by using the banal and cursory descriptors, 'positive' and 'negative.' Yet in my opinion, her article is only about

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[12]While Bobo limited herself to questions of race and gender, her model is certainly equipped to accommodate additional variables.

pleasure: the displeasure of black males at having to witness the disparaging characterisation of their filmic counterparts; the pleasure on the part of some of these men's wives at having quite different responses (and the subsequent pleasure of going back to see the film a second time, alone or with a female friend); the pleasure of black women in being able to find progressive elements in a mainstream film directed by a white male; and the pleasure that Bobo's respondents took in participating in her study, which prompted them take up political activism. All of these pleasures are catalogued in Bobo's field notes, yet she passes up the opportunity to frame her discussion within those terms. (Which doesn't mean that it can't be done.)

That audience pleasures are taken at face value and exempted from analysis or critique is not only characteristic of Bobo. As Tania Modleski notes, academic audience research methods replicate those used by the entertainment industry. This is especially true in the case of ratings-conscious TV, which has developed a battery of survey methods, questionnaires, and interview tactics that are not unlike those used by ethnographers. Modleski warns that as a result, these latter studies could end up "produc[ing] collaborations with that industry rather than critical analyses of the industry and the texts it produces." [paraphrased in Byars 1991:7] Judith Williamson concurs, remarking that "the left [now] grovel[s] before a popular culture [it] would once have tried to create

some alternative to." [1986a:14][13] Vigilantly maintaining a critical perspective should counter this tendency toward what John Clarke calls "cultural populism."[14]

Feminist Cultural Film Studies: Version #2

Another author who attempts to augment feminist film analysis with insights from cultural studies is Jackie Byars. Her book *All that Hollywood Allows*[15] -- yet another entry to the field of Hollywood melodrama -- optimistically sets out to right the balance between text and context but ends up overcompensating for the lack of attention paid to texts in studies such as Bobo's. Byars employs a multilayered method of critical analysis, one that comprises sociology, narratology, psychoanalysis and ideological analysis. Her framework is a flexible one, with particular approaches lending themselves well to certain types of films but not to others. Thus, for instance, psychoanalysis is especially suitable for family melodramas, while films about working women call for

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[13]Ironically, one of the examples Williamson draws upon to make her case is Modleski's *Loving With A Vengeance*.

[14]"Cultural populism romanticizes any critical distance consumers may have towards the dominant ideologies embedded in popular cultural forms as instances of political resistance to hegemonic culture." Cited in Leslie Roman and Linda Christian-Smith's introduction to *Becoming Feminine: The Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Leslie G. Roman et al (London, New York & Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, 1988), p. 12.

[15](Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

some sort of sociological analysis.[16] Byars' point that it "is not that one or another of these theories is superior but that none alone is sufficient" is well-taken. [1991:260]

This aggregate methodology, she claims,

> reveals the interaction of competing ideologies, showing how the formal elements of a text ... relate to its 'content' and how these refer to the material conditions in which the text was produced and consumed. [1991:63]

Ultimately, however, this is no more than an updated version of textual analysis. (She even retains the designation 'textual analysis.') While Byars does replace Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis with the object relations theories of Nancy Chodorow, the only component truly new to textual analysis is the sociology, which in this case is to be gleaned not from ethnographic fieldwork but from an analysis of film stereotypes. My complaint here is not with the analysis of stereotypes per se, because her discussion of them is quite sophisticated (she draws on the work of Tessa Perkins).[17] Furthermore, because she *is* doing historical research, she can't exactly go out and interview audience members. But Byars spends a significant amount of time in her introductory theory chapters extolling the virtues of ethnographic research, only to completely turn her back on it in the applied sections of the book.

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[16]One wonders, however, to what extent Byars chose her film categories to match her analytical ones.

[17]See Chapter Two, fn. 4.

In the end, then, her approach is still largely conjectural, and -- like the old version of

text analysis -- not sufficiently grounded in the pragmatics of audience reception. While

it does at least posit a plurality of textual positions (unlike its previous incarnation), it

doesn't link these up with information about the actual spectators who occupy them.

[Kaplan 1989:195] Where Byars falls short, in other words, is not in incorporating the

theoretical framework of cultural studies (which she does quite effectively) but in failing

to adopt its methodology. Even if this method were applied to an analysis of pleasure

(which it isn't, despite Byars' bemoaning the lack of attention to female pleasure

[1991:34]), it would thus be inadequate in elucidating the ways in which pleasure is

actually *had* and used by film-goers.[18]

Feminist Cultural Film Studies: Version #3

In contrast to Byars and Bobo, Christine Gledhill does *not* omit pleasure from her model

of popular cultural production and consumption. On the contrary, it is the central focus

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[18]Elizabeth Long is a little bit more forgiving -- as she diplomatically puts it, Byars' work is at least "oriented toward the intersection between 'texts' and audiences' cultural practices even when not engaged in empirical studies of cultural usages by specific people." [1989:432, fn. 7] Someone else who falls into this category is Elizabeth Ellsworth. In an interesting study, Ellsworth examined the published responses of feminist viewers of the film *Personal Best*. See her "Illicit Pleasures: Feminist Spectators and *Personal Best*," *Wide Angle* 8:2 (1986), pp. 45-58.

of her article, "Pleasurable Negotiations."[19] In this essay, she posits the concept of negotiation as a way of accounting for the relationship between the textual and the social subject. She defines negotiation as follows:

> As a model of meaning production, negotiation conceives cultural exchange as the intersection of processes of production and reception, in which overlapping but non-matching determinations operate. Meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience. [1988:67-68]

Underpinning her model is Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, which "describes the ever shifting, ever negotiating play of ideological, social and political forces through which power is maintained and contested." [Gledhill 1988:68][20] Thus, while texts might construct spectator positions aligned with dominant ideology, those positions are open to negotiation by audience members according to their own ideological affinities. This negotiation is particularly acute for women, given the oft-noted disparity between the patriarchal symbol 'Woman' and the historical socio-cultural experience of 'women.' [1988:75]

Gledhill identifies three different levels at which negotiation can be pinpointed: institutions, texts and audiences. The level of reception is the most variable and

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[19]In *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. Deidre Pribram (London & New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 64-89.

[20]For Gramsci's original formulation of hegemony, see *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

unpredictable, since it is open to a whole "range of determinations, potentially resistant or contradictory, arising from the differential social and cultural constitution of ... viewers -- by class, gender, race, age, personal history, and so on." [1988:70] It is also the most significant site of negotiation as far as this thesis is concerned, for it is here that pleasure figures most crucially, precisely because of its versatility.

Critiquing the traditional formulation of spectatorial pleasure (i.e., that it is contingent on the subject's assumption of the one and only narratively and patriarchally-ordained position) as too rigid, Gledhill maintains that there are a whole range of potentially pleasurable (and unpleasurable) positions negotiated by the viewer. This claim -- that meanings and pleasures are negotiated -- is not one that textual analysis would make. As textual analysis would have it, intention and reception are one and the same -- the subject is the passive recipient of textual meanings. [Pribram 1988:4] Here, however, an entirely different version of the text/spectator relation is being proposed.

Like Bobo and Byars, Gledhill calls for a methodology that combines textual and ethnographic analysis. While both of these methods have their drawbacks, these become more workable when the two are combined. Ethnographic analysis overcomes the unabashed universality of psychoanalysis by capturing the socio-historical specificity of spectatorship, and semio-psychoanalytic text inquiry doesn't sustain a simplistic or relativistic notion of cultural exchange. Unfortunately, Gledhill herself does not undertake ethnographic research in the applied part of her article (a critique of the film

Coma), claiming that she lacks the necessary skills. Nevertheless, I don't feel that this omission significantly undermines her argument (or at least not to the same extent that this same failure did for Byars.) The model she presents is still feasible.

As Gledhill notes in relation to an issue we have already touched on, there is a tendency in audience ethnographies to overemphasize the pleasures of reception, to the point that ideological and critical analysis might seem unnecessary. [1988:71][21] Locating moments of pleasure within the status quo is all very well, but this will not effect political change. What will is an analysis of how and why pleasure works -- at both the textual and the political (read contextual) level -- so that it can be more strategically deployed in feminist critical practice.

As a self-described feminist, Gledhill doesn't profess to be free of bias, as do those who uphold the value of "objective" empirical work. Ethnographic research can be used as a reality check for the interpretation of texts, and certainly Gledhill means for it to be used in this way ("to determine the conditions and possibilities of ... reading" [1988:75]), but she also has a more pointed objective. In her view the feminist critic should "enter into the polemics of negotiation, exploiting textual contradiction to put into circulation readings that draw the text into a female and/or feminist orbit." [1988:75] The more such

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[21]Patricia Mellencamp concurs: "if so many 'subversive' readings are available for everyone, with any text, then feminist films and videos addressed to women, by women and about women are hardly necessary, clever readers that 'the people' are." [1989:235]

readings are disseminated, the better the chances of inflecting the responses of a less

attuned viewer.[22] Gledhill proceeds to attempt exactly that with her analysis of *Coma*.

For Gledhill, pleasure and identity are closely linked. As she remarks, "social out-groups

seeking to identify themselves against dominant representations -- the working class,

women, blacks, gays -- need clearly articulated, recognizable and self-respecting self-

images." [1988:72] Linda Dittmar echoes these sentiments when she writes that women

need

> narratives of emergence which free [them] from their socially
> constructed role as objects for exploitation by others, and
> which posit for them instead the role of desiring subjects
> who negotiate their own place in society. All strife is vital.
> All strife demands a story. [Dittmar 1986:84][23]

The idea isn't to reject narrative and identity, as it was in the early days of feminist

criticism. It is simply to exercise a greater measure of control over and pleasure in them.

These identities need not be fixed once and for all -- on the contrary, they should

accommodate a certain degree of fluidity and contradiction. [Gledhill 1988:72] This is one

of the inherent problems of psychoanalytic text criticism -- its insistence upon the fixity

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[22]This is essentially the dynamic that Bobo's research charted.

[23]E. Ann Kaplan is like-minded: "Our need for representation is something that we ignore at our peril: if feminists do not satisfy that need in their theory and practices, then people will stay dedicated to dominant, commercial representational modes." [1989:198]

of the subject. Subjectivity is more properly thought of as a nomadic process;[24] thus, "a range of positions of identification may exist within any text; and ... within the social situation of their viewing, audiences may shift subject positions as they interact with the text." [1988:73] This shifting process is not picked up by textual analysis, for it concentrates on the sum total of meanings produced by a text. It is only an analysis of the "haphazard, unsystematic viewing experience" (of the viewer, not of the trained critic) that will be able to determine the political (as opposed to ideological) effects of texts.

Analysis

Putting text and context analysis together under the same theoretical and methodological roof is not as straightforward as I have made it out to be. Although they both treat the meaning-making process, they in fact have very disparate methods and objects of investigation, consistent with their particular epistemological perspective. The difference between them is not simply one of emphasis, in other words. They disagree over one of the fundamental issues of media studies: the question of at what level the media have their effects. [Bergstrom & Doane 1989:12] Textual analysis argues that meaning is

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[24]This turn of phrase comes to John Fiske via Lawrence Grossberg. See his "Moments of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience," in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Institutions*, eds. Ellen Seiter et al (London, New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1989), pp. 56-78.

produced at the level of the unconscious, while contextual analysis maintains that it transpires within culture.

Ultimately their objects of study are completely different: textual analysis deals with the spectator and contextual analysis with the audience. The expression 'female spectatorship' as used in the literature often elides this distinction, which is as follows:

> The *spectator* ... is a subject constituted in signification, interpellated by the film or TV text.... A group of people seated in a single auditorium looking at a film ... is a *social audience*.... Social audiences become spectators the moment they engage in the processes and pleasures of meaning-making attendant on watching a film or TV programme. In taking part in the social act of consuming representations, a group of spectators becomes a social audience. [Kuhn 1984:23]

Thus, while one can be a social audience member and a spectator at one and the same time, the one is not reducible to the other. Yet nor are they entirely separable from one another. [Mayne 1990:6-7] That the two concepts overlap speaks to the need for a theory that can accommodate the both of them and account for their relationship.

Many equate this to the task of comparing apples and oranges and throw their hands up in resignation. As we have seen, however, others have begun looking for ways to break the impasse. Gledhill's formulation of cultural exchange is probably the best suited in this regard.[25] Her flexible framework attends equally to the spectator and the

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[25]While I am obviously enthusiastic about Gledhill's work, her article has (to date) gone virtually unnoticed. In the course of my research, I found only two or three references to this piece. All of these were positive, but the general lack of interest

audience, aiming to identify their points of convergence as well as divergence. Texts, viewers and context are seen as mutually informing yet still relatively autonomous. Ideology is not absolutely determining, being instead subject to continual (re)negotiation.[26]

Gledhill has taken a creative and what I am coming to see as a typically feminist approach, proposing that feminist film criticism adopt what Linda Gordon would call a liminal method:

> This in-between would not imply resolution, careful balance of fact and myth, or synthesis of fact and interpretation. My sense of a liminal method is rather a condition of being constantly pulled, usually off balance, sometimes teetering wildly, almost always tense. The tension can't be released. Indeed, the very desire to find a way to relax the tension is a temptation that must be avoided. Neither goal can be surrendered. [cited in Mayne 1989:234]

This is another instance of the both/and strategy mentioned in the previous chapter, and reflects the view that feminism "is a heterogeneous political activity and not a discrete

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perplexes me. The only conceivable explanation is that, as I mention in the thesis introduction, pleasure has been temporarily set aside as an object of investigation until the more general methodological and theoretical problems inherent in adopting a new framework get sorted out.

[26]An additional mark in Gledhill's favor is that her framework is very clearly laid out -- no mean feat given the current propensity to intellectual obfuscation. While some of her colleagues have suggested that the relationship between text and context might best be addressed by discourse theory, I was unable to find any lucid articulation of how exactly that might be done. The theory was duly laid out, but the question of methodology was completely ignored. See, for instance, Kuhn [1984, 1988] and Kaplan [1986b].

methodological position." [Butzel 1989:114] In Gledhill's version, textual and contextual analysis are placed in dialogue with one another, rather than relegated to independent spheres of investigation -- a tactic that inevitably produces different results than would either of them taken separately.

On the subject of pleasure, some of the same methodological considerations arise. Textual and contextual analysis (in the best of cases) both treat pleasure, but because of their respective methodological biases, they end up with very different conceptions as to what it is. Generally speaking, feminist text analysis identifies the ideologically and patriarchally sanctioned pleasures of the text; context analysis, on the other hand, chronicles the responses that exceed them. [Mayne 1989:231] Terry Lovell frames the same idea in slightly different terms:

> Ideological analysis can identify the manner and extent to which those pleasures are mobilised for ideological functions. Use-value analysis will be able to identify the resistance which these commodities offer to that ideological role.... The interface between these two is ... always and necessarily an irregular one. [Lovell 1981:48]

Annette Kuhn's account of a rather particular film event is a case in point.[27] Kuhn attended an all-female screening of a film about a women's body-building competition, after which there was a panel discussion. The women's responses during the screening were markedly different than those voiced in the subsequent discussion. As spectators,

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[27]"The Body and Cinema: Some Problems for Feminism," in *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Susan Sheridan (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 11-23.

they clearly enjoyed the film, egging on some of the competitors and booing others --

a reaction that would have been anticipated by text analysis. As an audience, however

(and a quite specific one at that), they were extremely critical of the film (yet no less

consumed by it -- an indication for Kuhn that pleasure can also be had in resistance). A

method of inquiry that engaged with only one of these facets of reception would have

completely overlooked the significance of these discrepancies.[28]

The composite theory put forth by Gledhill -- which de Lauretis would call "the theory

of the process of textual production and consumption" [de Lauretis 1987:92] -- allows on

the contrary that popular culture solicits a whole range of pleasures, from recognition

and identification to contradiction and resistance. This versatility itself becomes

pleasurable. Dana Polan elaborates:

> In a spiral of involvement and disavowal, the mass-culture
> spectator can move easily in and out of various positions,
> suggesting perhaps that it is precisely this weaving of
> contradictory positions, rather than the achieved assumption
> of any one position, that may constitute much of the power
> and pleasure of the operation of mass culture. [1988:193]

Thus, the notion of popular culture as "sheer" or "immediate" pleasure has to be

abandoned. On the contrary, pleasure is concurrent with displeasure rather than opposed

to it. [Polan 1988:200]

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[28]As Florence Jacobowitz argues insightfully, "experiencing the emergence of social tensions and contradictions in a collective setting is part of the pleasures of popular culture rarely discussed. It gives one pleasure in an unconventional sense of the word -- it allows people to recognize and share conflicts and experiences which are otherwise glossed over and trivialized. These kinds of pleasure are potentially transformative *if* recognized and mobilised." [1986:29]

What the spectator does with her pleasure is another matter. Pleasure in and of itself is not political, but it can be put to political use, as Bobo's case study demonstrated. I suspect it was precisely the pleasure that her viewers collectively experienced that spurred them to take political action. It is only by continuing to explore such instances of textual appropriation that this suspicion will be confirmed.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined three feminist film appropriations of cultural studies. While Bobo, Byars and Gledhill borrow equally liberally from cultural studies, the models of popular film consumption they present are each inflected somewhat differently. As we have seen, Bobo concentrates on context and the audience, at the expense of the text, while Byars focusses predominantly on the text and the spectator. As a result, they end up speaking about two very different things. Gledhill's framework is more sophisticated in that it addresses the relationship between text and context and between spectator and audience.

The differences between textual and contextual analysis identified throughout the course of this chapter underscore the need for a further investigation of pleasure. As this review of feminist cultural film studies has made apparent, the pleasure uncovered by text analysis is not the same as that uncovered by context analysis. According to the former,

pleasure comes from recognition and identification; according to the latter, it originates in contradiction and resistance. *Is* there a contradiction here, or is there a way of articulating the relationship between them? Gledhill certainly believes that this is possible, not to mention essential, if pleasure is to live up to its full political potential. So do a number of other cultural theorists, two of whom I shall consider in the next chapter. Because I do not want my discussion of pleasure to take place in a theoretical vacuum, positioning it within the context of a feminist politics is crucial.

CHAPTER FOUR
THEORY AND PRACTICE: A POLITICS OF PLEASURE

Introduction

Having considered a range of feminist film critical positions on pleasure in the preceding chapters, I turn now to the work of two mainstream cultural theorists, Roland Barthes and Fredric Jameson. While they both have either nothing to say or nothing positive to say about feminism, there is still much of value in what they have to say about pleasure and popular culture. My intention with the thesis is precisely to interface a variety of discourses on film and pleasure (be they feminist, mainstream, critical, theoretical, practical or political), not randomly but strategically. Barthes and Jameson are not the only male cultural studies theorists to engage with pleasure at some length.[1] But because they both take a two-pronged approach to the question of pleasure, their work ties in nicely with that of their feminist colleagues. On the other hand, because they are concerned not with a specific cultural practice such as film but with popular culture in general, their politics of pleasure are articulated in broader terms, providing a useful point of reference and comparison for a pointedly political and feminist use of pleasure. I am not, in other words, proposing that Barthes' and Jameson's frameworks be used to

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[1]See, for instance, Colin Mercer's "A Poverty of Desire: Pleasure and Popular Politics," in *Formations of Pleasure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) and "Complicit Pleasures," in *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, eds. Tony Bennett et al (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); and Simon Frith's "Hearing Secret Harmonies," in *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

replace existing feminist paradigms. On the contrary, they are meant purely and simply as expository complements.

Roland Barthes

As we saw in the previous chapter, because text and context analysis have different objects of study, they end up with rather different conceptions of cinematic pleasure. Thus, textual analysis understands pleasure as on the whole textually delimited and ideologically complicit. Contextual analysis, on the other hand, identifies pleasure as explicitly nonconformist and subject to a whole range of contextual determinations. Yet almost everyone uses the one term 'pleasure' to refer to these two (at times) very distinct notions, without acknowledging its multivalence. In my opinion it is inadvisable to continue using the one term without any providing any definitional clarification. This will only lead to the kind of confusion that arose before 'the spectator' was adequately differentiated from 'the audience.'[2]

In this section I use Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* to flesh out the distinction between these two forms of pleasure.[3] Barthes' essay is an important piece of work which has

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[2]See Chapter Three and Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres," *Screen* 25:1 (1984), pp. 18-28.

[3]trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

largely been ignored in feminist film scholarship[4] -- I can count on one hand the number of times I came across a reference to this book. This is astonishing, since there are so many intriguing parallels to be drawn. What follows is thus very much my own rendition.

The Pleasure of the Text is an exploration not so much of texts (the focus of Barthes' previous book)[5] but of textual reception, and, in particular, the pleasures of such reception. The book operates on two levels at once: it is both an explanation and an enactment of pleasure. Accordingly, Barthes argues that there are two kinds of pleasure -- *plaisir* (pleasure proper) and *jouissance* (somewhat inadequately rendered in English as bliss). He describes them (and the texts that give rise to them) as follows:

> Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of [her] tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis [her] relation with language. [1975:14]

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[4]This is certainly not true of French feminist psychoanalytic and literary criticism. On the contrary, as Jane Gallop notes, the Barthesian concept of *jouissance* has "come to serve as an emblem of French feminine theory." [1984:111] The question of why it has not yet filtered its way into the discourse of American feminism is taken up in her "Beyond the *Jouissance* Principle," *Representations* 7 (1984), 110-115.

[5]*S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

The distinction between pleasure and bliss is not hard-and-fast ("'pleasure' here (and without our being able to anticipate) sometimes extends to bliss, sometimes is opposed to it" [1975:19]) but it is nevertheless (and perhaps for this very reason) useful.

In Barthes' version, pleasure is a function of ideology -- it fulfills the subject, providing her with an imaginary sense of unity. As we saw earlier, ideology constitutes human beings as unified subjects by providing them with a set of images with which to make sense of their fragmented world. The subject identifies with these images and representations and is thus made whole. This sense of fulfillment is pleasing, reassuring. Bliss, on the other hand, eludes the structuring effect of ideology and is thus (at least initially) disconcerting to the subject, precisely because it is *not* reaffirming of the subject's identity. Of the two, bliss is the more interesting, in part because it has been somewhat neglected as an object of study, but even more so because of its revolutionary (this is Barthes' word) potential. [1975:23][6] In contrast to pleasure's ideological function, Barthes maintains, bliss fulfills a political function:[7] "it consists in de-politicizing what is apparently political, and in politicizing what apparently is not." [1975:44] Or in Jane Gallop's words, "*jouissance* has a power, the power to unsettle foundations and

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[6]In this particular passage Barthes is actually referring to pleasure. I am allowing myself to correct him here, since his definition of pleasure elsewhere clearly suggests quite the opposite. As he himself admits, "*pleasure/bliss*: terminologically, there is always a vacillation -- I stumble, I err." [1975:4] This kind of slippage permeates the essay, and is an indication of the difficulty of pulling them apart rather than ineptitude.

[7]A further telling contrast between pleasure and bliss is that, as Richard Howard points out in his introductory note to *The Pleasure of the Text*, pleasure is a state while bliss is an action. Pleasure befits the status quo while bliss yearns to overcome it. [p. vi]

classifications, to shake up ideology." [1984:112] Because bliss withstands ideology, it is of strategic importance to a feminism that seeks to undermine and offset the workings of patriarchy.

Yet, as we already know, bliss cannot be altogether separated from pleasure, for the two are mutually informing. As Barthes argues, there are two "edges" to a text: "an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge ... and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours)." [1975:6][8] These two edges correspond to pleasure and bliss respectively, and both are necessary in order for a text to be designated "erotic": "neither [one] nor [the other] is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so." [1975:7]

Until recently in feminist film studies, criticism was one-sided, attending to either one of these edges but not both. Thus, textual analysis identified the pleasures (or displeasures, in the case of the feminist spectator) of complying with the text, and context analysis the bliss in resisting the machinations of the text. Neither method addressed the relationship between the two. The (awkwardly worded but aptly named) theory of the process of textual production and consumption introduced in the last chapter is, I would argue, better equipped to handle this duplicity, for it can deal with both pleasure and bliss, as well as their "contradictory interplay." [1975:62]

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[8]It is next to impossible to paraphrase Barthes and to do him justice at the same time, so I am letting him speak for himself more often than correct academic discourse would normally allow.

It could be argued that feminist filmmaking was similarly one-sided. As we saw in Chapter One, feminist interventions in film practice ranged between, on the one hand, retaining dominant forms and substituting more appropriate content (thereby invoking conventional pleasures), and on the other, developing a whole new cinematic language, a countercinema (in which pleasure was denied but bliss abounded). It is only now that feminist film practice is "settling down," locating a moderate middle ground in which pleasure and bliss are weighted more equally.

Barthes could very well have been describing this newfangled film aesthetic in his own account of "alternative" spectatorship in an article entitled "Upon Leaving the Movie Theater":[9]

> There is another way of going to the cinema (other than going armed with the discourse of counter-ideology); it is by letting myself be *twice* fascinated by the image and by its surroundings, as if I had two bodies at once: a narcissistic body which is looking, lost in gazing into the nearby mirror, and a perverse body, ready to fetishize not the image, but precisely that which exceeds it.... [1980:4]

Although here he does not use the terms, he seems to be invoking the pleasure/bliss distinction once again, where pleasure would correspond to the narcissistic submission to the image and bliss to the perverse transcendence of it. This notion of dual spectatorship brings to mind de Lauretis' characterization of contemporary feminist narrative films as presented in Chapter One: films that "have somehow managed to

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[9]In *The Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings*, ed. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (New York: Tanam Press, 1980), pp. 1-4.

inscribe ... my woman's look -- next to, side by side, together with, my other (cinematic) look." [de Lauretis 1987:114] Just as de Lauretis envisages a productive tension within feminist cinema between politics and ideology, so too does Barthes:

> There are those who want a text ... without a shadow, without the 'dominant ideology'; but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text.... The text needs its shadow: this shadow is *a bit* of ideology, *a bit* of representation, *a bit* of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro. [1975:32]

The subject of this text -- just like the female subject -- is caught up in contradiction:

> Now the subject who keeps the two texts in [her] field and in [her] hands the reins of pleasure and bliss is an anachronic subject, for [s]he simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture ... and in the destruction of that culture: [s]he enjoys the consistency of [her] selfhood (that is [her] pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is [her] bliss). [S]he is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse. [1975:14]

We see, then, that Barthes' concerns dovetail quite nicely with those of feminism. What is at issue for him is "the subversion of all ideology." [1975:33] The feminism I have outlined confines its agenda -- for the moment, at least -- to the subversion of patriarchal ideology. Both see that the route to such emancipation is through popular culture. Importantly, neither Barthes nor contemporary film feminism advocate the renunciation of pleasure; pleasure is acceptable in good measure, as long as it is suitably counterweighted with bliss. Barthes and his feminist counterparts have successfully delineated what I would call a politics of the erotic.

Fredric Jameson

In an article titled "Pleasure: A Political Issue," Fredric Jameson briefly recapitulates and

critiques various analyses of pleasure, from Brecht and the Frankfurt School to French

post-structuralism and feminist film criticism.[10] Taking (what he perceives as) their

shortcomings as a point of departure, he outlines his own position with regards to

pleasure. While I do not want to embark on an extensive review of his essay, I do want

to focus on two aspects of it: his assessment of feminism and his own formulation of a

politics of pleasure. I will argue that feminist film culture's stand on pleasure -- at least

as it stands today -- has more in common with Jameson's model than he might have

suspected.

In the essay, Jameson raises the question of how pleasure is to be spoken about and, like

Barthes, he outlines two options:[11]

> Will it focus on the experience of the pleasurable, and what
> that might mean for politics or do to political activity? Or is
> something else at stake, namely the *idea* of pleasure, the
> ideologies of pleasure, the political value of slogans which
> raise the banner of that abstract idea, about which the
> familiar question might be debated as to its subversive power
> as a revolutionary "demand"? [1983:2]

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[10]In *Formations of Pleasure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 1-14.

[11]Indeed, as we shall see, Jameson's arguments are essentially the same as Barthes', except that he couches them in slightly different terms.

If we aim this question at feminist film criticism, we find that pleasure has been understood and discussed in both these senses. Thus, text-based critiques focus on the ideology of pleasure (and the extent to which it is complicit with patriarchy) and context-based studies investigate the actual experience of pleasure (or bliss, in Barthes' terminology). By and large the findings of the latter have refuted the projections of the former. These encouraging results have, as we have seen, prompted a rethinking of the feminist political position with regard to pleasure. Pleasure's "ideological" function is now being reclaimed, the difference being that this time it is aligned with a progressive feminist politics rather than with the patriarchal status quo.

Jameson wonders further whether these two ways of speaking of pleasure – as an experience or phenomenon on the one hand, and as an ideology or political value on the other -- have anything to do with one another. [1983:6] He notes that most theorisations conceive of pleasure in only one of these ways, and maintains that no coherent attempt has been made to bring the theory and the practice of pleasure together. For Jameson, a cultural politics can only be effective if it articulates the relationship between the two.[12] In this regard, he proposes that pleasure be thought of allegorically:

> the thematizing of a particular 'pleasure' as a political issue
> ... must always involve a dual focus, in which the local issue
> is meaningful and desirable in and of itself, but is also *at one
> and the same time* taken as the *figure* for Utopia in general,
> and for the systemic revolutionary transformation of society
> as a whole. [1983:13]

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[12]Barthes concurs: "the important thing is to equalize the field of pleasure, to abolish the false opposition of practical life and contemplative life." [1975:59]

In other words, if the experience of localised pleasures is to become "genuinely political" and avoid the "complacencies of 'hedonism'," it must also in some way be representative of a greater cause. [1983:14] What Jameson is suggesting is that if we are to appropriate pleasure from mainstream culture and use it as a political weapon -- as feminist filmmakers are attempting to do -- then we must do so deliberately and systematically, and with a greater political purpose in mind. If not,

> the political demand becomes reduced to yet another local 'issue' in the micro-politics of this or that limited group or its particular hobby or specialization, and a slogan which, once satisfied, leads no further politically. [1983:13]

Contemporary film feminism (or at least the most current film feminism presented in this thesis) is certainly not a "micro-politics", what with its overlay of race and class issues (among others) onto gender issues. And pleasure, as we have seen, has become central to its politics. In feminist films, pleasure is (in most cases) not haphazard or incidental. On the contrary, it is being used deliberately in the struggle for social change. The experience and the ideology of pleasure are indeed related in this case. Judging by what we have seen in the thesis so far, feminist film praxis more than adequately meets Jameson's criteria for an effective cultural politics.[13]

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[13]Cathy Schwichtenberg has a much more vibrant vision of the relationship between politics and pleasure: "...if pleasure and politics broach the divide to work together in process, this may be productive for a relentless analysis. In this type of analysis, pleasure and politics would run together in high-key, traversing surfaces. Politics would be sensualized and pleasure would be reflective. For a relentless analysis pushes through limits. By refusing entrapment, it is always out of bounds. A relentless analysis offers

Jameson himself is not so full of praise for feminism, or at least feminism as represented by Laura Mulvey. [1983:7] Although his comments are somewhat outdated considering the advances feminism has made since 1975 (when "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was first published), they are nonetheless useful -- for this very reason. Using Mulvey as a reference point, in other words, we can see how far feminist film theory and criticism has come in the last fifteen years.

Jameson takes exception to Mulvey for two reasons. First, he finds her analysis of pleasure limited because it speaks to gender rather than class issues. This line of reasoning (that "something of the politics of [her] article could still ... be argued in the older class terms" [1983:7]) is characteristic of the male left tendency (by now pretty much outmoded, one hopes) to subsume gender issues under class issues and to undermine the importance and validity of feminist critique in its own right. That Mulvey did not consider issues of class *in addition to* those of gender is a genuine shortcoming which has been pretty much rectified. Of late feminism has proposed a much more trenchant, not to mention equitable, approach to class and gender (as well as introducing entirely new categories of difference and oppression into the debate), in which neither takes precedence over the other.[14]

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no apologies and it doesn't give up, give out, or give in. It always discovers new avenues of approach." [1985:61]

[14]See, for instance, Sandra Harding's "Other Others and Fractured Identities: Issues for Epistemologists" [1986] and Heidi Hartmann's "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism" [1981].

Jameson's second criticism has to do with Mulvey's theoretical framework. Psychoanalysis is (as Jameson is certainly not the first to point out) ahistorical -- it assumes that its model of psychosexual development holds for all time. In the last few decades there have been significant shifts in the configuration of family relations which have turned psychoanalysis on its ear (viz., the drastic increase in the number of families headed by single parents or same-sex partners). Likewise, insofar as pleasure is concerned, we cannot assume that it will be (or has been) always produced and taken in the same way. The previous two chapters of the thesis have confirmed this. While Jameson's point regarding psychoanalysis is well-taken, he forgets (as does almost everyone else) that Mulvey was talking about a specific film aesthetic that predominated during the heyday of the Hollywood studio system (roughly the 1950s). Also, her critique of pleasure was very much steeped in the politics of the time -- as she later remarks, "I still stand by my 'Visual Pleasure' article, but it belongs to a particular moment in the history of our particular movement." [1989:163] As regards feminist film criticism today, the historical specificity of pleasure has certainly become a more explicit concern, as evidenced by the growing number of studies that focus on the history of female spectatorship and pleasure.

<u>Conclusion</u>

In this last chapter, I have taken what some might perceive as an unorthodox approach by inserting the work of two male cultural theorists into a feminist piece. Yet as I mention at the outset of the thesis, this is what feminist criticism is all about: a reinterpretation of cultural texts. Until such a time that the history of patriarchy is completely rewritten, this is what feminist intervention will consist of.

Barthes' work on pleasure and bliss was particularly useful, in that it allowed me to elaborate on the two versions of pleasure that emerged from my analysis of the feminist film literature. While I am not proposing that his terminology be adopted, I am suggesting that pleasure's multivalence be recognized and addressed. This has not transpired as yet; hopefully this thesis will serve to fill that gap. Had I not been able to distinguish between the various interpretations of pleasure, for instance, I would not have been able to build my argument about contemporary feminist narrative cinema's subversive pleasure politics.

Similarly, Jameson provided me with a way of broaching the question of pleasure's political potential. Using his framework for a cultural politics, I have been able to demonstrate that the correspondences between the theory and practice of pleasure within feminist film culture make for an effective and liberating pleasure politics. Jameson's critique of feminism also provided an occasion for rebuttal, allowing me to end this

investigation of feminist film culture on a strong note.

CONCLUSION

What I have attempted to do in this thesis is to weave together a variety of perspectives on pleasure. In Chapter One, I outlined the basic features of what Teresa de Lauretis identifies as a new feminist film aesthetic. This aesthetic does not spurn pleasure in the way that its predecessors did; on the contrary, it embraces pleasure, but certainly not naively. Conventional pleasures are made available, but at the same time critiqued and undermined by strategies that call attention to the fact of their construction. A double structure of pleasure is thus put into play: pleasure is to be had both in complicity and in resistance.

Chapters Two and Three were concerned with feminist film theory and criticism, and in particular with the ways in which female spectatorship and pleasure have been theorised. The method most commonly used in feminist film studies today integrates aspects of textual and ethnographic analysis into what I have called (after de Lauretis) a theory of the process of textual production and consumption. Implicit in this theory is the understanding that film audiences play an active role in the construction of meaning and pleasure. This mode of analysis is equipped to uncover both conventional (text-bound) and unorthodox (context-bound) pleasures, as well as to investigate the nature of the relationship between the two.

The structural correspondences between these two fields of feminist intervention (the bifurcated modes of address in contemporary feminist narratives and the liminal method of feminist film analysis) are considerable. Using the work of Barthes and Jameson allowed me to examine the relationship between theory and practice in greater detail.

In the last chapter, I sought to bring the theory and the practice of pleasure together into a discussion and evaluation of the politics of pleasure. A "politics" is just that: "the theory and practice of an ideology or ideologies." [Schwichtenberg 1985:61, fn. 4] While the antagonism between theorists and practitioners is particularly acute within the women's movement, it does not seem to be apparent (or relevant) in this case. The feminist critique of pleasure takes place on both fronts at once and marks a concerted effort on all levels to reclaim a pleasurable subjectivity for all women, whether they be onscreen images or real people sitting in a movie theatre.

Nor is this struggle confined to film. Women have been exploring a range of other popular cultural practices such as dance, theatre and literature for a number of years. All of these discussions form a part of an ongoing debate about pleasure and popular culture, and about the extent to which popular cultural texts operate as a site of ideological resistance.

Framing my discussion of pleasure within the parameters of gender and cinema was a strategic choice, one that resonated well with my own personal politics. Had I chosen

to investigate another medium or subcultural category, I suspect my conclusions would have been very much the same. My treatment of pleasure, in other words, is not specific to film but can be generalized to other popular cultural forms.

My objectives with the thesis were three-fold. First, I wanted to identify the key issues, definitions and developments in the film critical debate around female spectatorship and pleasure. Second, I wanted to trace how these same issues were addressed and engaged with at the level of film practice. Thirdly, I hoped to propose a model for the analysis of pleasure that would recognize both its inhibiting and emancipatory aspects. If more remains to be said on the topic, it is because, as Barthes puts it, "no 'thesis' on the pleasure of the text is possible; barely an inspection (an introspection) that falls short." [1975:34]

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