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# *Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema\**

by Teresa de Lauretis

When Silvia Bovenschen in 1976 posed the question “Is there a feminine aesthetic?,” the only answer she could give was, yes and no: “Certainly there is, if one is talking about aesthetic awareness and modes of sensory perception. Certainly not, if one is talking about an unusual variant of artistic production or about a painstakingly constructed theory of art.”<sup>1</sup> If this contradiction seems familiar to anyone even vaguely acquainted with the development of feminist thought over the past fifteen years, it is because it echoes a contradiction specific to, and perhaps even constitutive of, the women’s movement itself: a two-fold pressure, a simultaneous pull in opposite directions, a tension toward the positivity of politics, or affirmative action in behalf of women as social subjects, on one front, and the negativity inherent in the radical critique of patriarchal, bourgeois culture on the other. It is also the contradiction of women in language, as we attempt to speak as subjects of discourses which negate or objectify us through their representations. As Bovenschen put it, “we are in a terrible bind. How do we speak? In what categories do we think? Is even logic a bit of virile trickery? . . . Are our desires and notions of happiness so far removed from cultural traditions and models?” (p. 119).

Not surprisingly, therefore, a similar contradiction was also central to the debate on women’s cinema, its politics and its language, as it was articulated within Anglo-American film theory in the early 1970s in relation to feminist politics and the women’s movement, on the one hand, and to artistic avant-garde practices and women’s filmmaking,

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1. Silvia Bovenschen, “Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?,” trans. by Beth Weckmueller, *New German Critique*, 10 (Winter 1977), 136. [Originally published in *Aesthetik und Kommunikation*, 25 (September 1976)]

on the other. There too, the accounts of feminist film culture produced in the mid-to-late 70s tended to emphasize a dichotomy between two concerns of the women's movement and two types of film work that seemed to be at odds with each other: one called for immediate documentation for purposes of political activism, consciousness-raising, self-expression or the search for "positive images" of woman; the other insisted on rigorous, formal work on the medium — or better, the cinematic apparatus, understood as a social technology — in order to analyze and disengage the ideological codes embedded in representation.

Thus, as Bovenschen deplores the "opposition between feminist demands and artistic production" (p. 131), the tug of war in which women artists were caught between the movement's demands that women's art portray women's activities, document demonstrations, etc., and the formal demands of "artistic activity and its concrete work with material and media"; so does Laura Mulvey set out two successive moments of feminist film culture. First, she states, there was a period marked by the effort to change the *content* of cinematic representation (to present realistic images of women, to record women talking about their real-life experiences), a period "characterized by a mixture of consciousness-raising and propaganda."<sup>2</sup> This was followed by a second moment in which the concern with the language of representation as such became predominant, and the "fascination with the cinematic process" led filmmakers and critics to the "use of and interest in the aesthetic principles and terms of reference provided by the avant-garde tradition" (p. 7).

In this latter period, the common interest of both avant-garde cinema and feminism in the politics of images, or the political dimension of aesthetic expression, made them turn to the theoretical debates on language and imaging that were going on outside of cinema, in semiotics, psychoanalysis, critical theory, and the theory of ideology. Thus it was argued that, in order to counter the aesthetic of realism, which was hopelessly compromised with bourgeois ideology, as well as Hollywood cinema, avant-garde and feminist filmmakers must take an oppositional stance against narrative "illusionism" and in favor of formalism. The assumption was that "foregrounding the process itself, privileging the signifier, necessarily disrupts aesthetic unity and forces the spectator's attention on the means of production of meaning" (p. 7).

While Bovenschen and Mulvey would not relinquish the political

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2. Laura Mulvey, "Feminism, Film and the Avant-Garde," *Framework*, 10 (Spring 1979), 6. See also Christine Gledhill's account, "Recent Developments in Feminist Film Criticism," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 3:4 (1978).

commitment of the movement and the need to construct other representations of woman, the way in which they posed the question of expression (a “feminine aesthetic,” a “new language of desire”) was couched in the terms of a traditional notion of art, specifically the one propounded by modernist aesthetics. Bovenschen’s insight that what is being expressed in the decoration of the household and the body, or in letters and other private forms of writing, is in fact women’s aesthetic needs and impulses, is a crucial one. But the importance of that insight is undercut by the very terms that define it: the “*pre-aesthetic* realms.”

After quoting a passage from Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Bovenschen comments: “Here the ambivalence once again: on the one hand we see aesthetic activity deformed, atrophied, but on the other we find, even within this restricted scope, socially creative impulses which, however, have no outlet for aesthetic development, no opportunities for growth . . . . [These activities] remained bound to everyday life, feeble attempts to make this sphere more aesthetically pleasing. But the price for this was narrowmindedness. The object could never leave the realm in which it came into being, it remained tied to the household, it could never break loose and initiate communication” (pp. 132-133). Just as Plath laments that Mrs. Willard’s beautiful home-braided rug is not hung on the wall but put to the use for which it was made, and thus quickly spoiled of its beauty, so would Bovenschen have “the object” of artistic creation leave its context of production and use value in order to enter the “artistic realm” and so to “initiate communication”; that is to say, to enter the museum, the art gallery, the market. In other words, art is what is enjoyed publicly rather than privately, has an exchange value rather than a use value, and that value is conferred by socially established aesthetic canons.

Mulvey, too, in proposing the destruction of narrative and visual pleasure as the foremost objective of women’s cinema, hails an established tradition, albeit a radical one: the historic left avant-garde tradition that goes back to Eisentein and Vertov (if not Méliès) and through Brecht reaches its peak of influence in Godard, and on the other side of the Atlantic, the tradition of American avant-garde cinema. “The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment.”<sup>3</sup> But much as Mulvey and other avant-garde filmmakers insisted that women’s cinema ought to avoid a politics of emotions and seek to problematize the

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3. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen*, 16:3 (Autumn 1975), 18.

female spectator's identification with the on-screen image of woman, the response to her theoretical writings, like the reception of her films (co-directed with Peter Wollen), showed no consensus. Feminist critics, spectators and filmmakers remained doubtful. For example, Ruby Rich: "According to Mulvey, the woman is not visible in the audience which is perceived as male; according to Johnston, the woman is not visible on the screen . . . . How does one formulate an understanding of a structure that insists on our absence even in the face of our presence? What is there in a film with which a woman viewer identifies? How can the contradictions be used as a critique? And how do all these factors influence what one makes as a woman filmmaker, or specifically as a feminist filmmaker?"<sup>4</sup>

The questions of identification, self-definition, the modes or the very possibility of envisaging oneself as subject — which the male avant-garde artists and theorists have also been asking, on their part, for almost one hundred years, even as they work to subvert the dominant representations or to challenge their hegemony — are fundamental questions for feminism. If identification is "not simply one physical mechanism among others, but the operation itself whereby the human subject is constituted," as Laplanche and Pontalis describe it, then it must be all the more important, theoretically and politically, for women who have never before represented ourselves as subjects, and whose images and subjectivities — until very recently, if at all — have not been ours to shape, to portray, or to create.<sup>5</sup>

There is indeed reason to question the theoretical paradigm of a subject-object dialectic, whether Hegelian or Lacanian, that subtends both the aesthetic and the scientific discourses of Western culture; for what that paradigm contains, what those discourses rest on, is the unacknowledged assumption of sexual difference: that the human subject, Man, is the male. As in the originary distinction of classical myth reaching us through the Platonic tradition, human creation and all that is human — mind, spirit, history, language, art, or symbolic capacity — is defined in contradistinction to formless chaos, *phusis* or nature, to something that is female, matrix and matter; and on this primary binary opposition, all the others are modeled. As Lea Melandri states, "Idealism, the oppositions of mind to body, of rationality to matter, originate in a twofold concealment: of the woman's body and of labor power. Chronologically, however, even prior to the commodity and the labor power that has produced it, the matter which was

4. B. Ruby Rich, in "Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics," *New German Critique*, 13 (Winter 1978), 87.

5. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. by D. Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), p. 206.

negated in its concreteness and particularity, in its 'relative plural form,' is the woman's body. Woman enters history having already lost concreteness and singularity: she is the economic machine that reproduces the human species, and she is the Mother, an equivalent more universal than money, the most abstract measure ever invented by patriarchal ideology."<sup>6</sup>

That this proposition remains true when tested on the aesthetic of modernism or the major trends in avant-garde cinema from visionary to structural-materialist film, on the films of Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow or Jean-Luc Godard, but is not true of the films of Yvonne Rainer, Valie Export, Chantal Akerman or Marguerite Duras, for example; that it remains valid for the films of Fassbinder but not those of Ottinger, the films of Pasolini and Bertolucci but not Cavani's, and so on, suggests to me that it is perhaps time to shift the terms of the question altogether.

To ask of these women's films: what formal, stylistic or thematic markers point to a female presence behind the camera?, and hence to generalize and universalize, to say: this is the look and sound of women's cinema, this is its language — finally only means complying, accepting a certain definition of art, cinema and culture, and obligingly showing how women can and do "contribute," pay their tribute, to "society." Put another way, to ask whether there is a feminine or female aesthetic, or a specific language of women's cinema, is to remain caught in the master's house and there, as Audre Lorde's suggestive metaphor warns us, to legitimate the hidden agendas of a culture we badly need to change. "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"; cosmetic changes, she is telling us, won't be enough for the majority of women — women of color, black women, and white women as well; or in her own words, "assimilation within a solely western-european herstory if not acceptable."<sup>7</sup> It is time we listened. Which is not to say that we should dispense with rigorous analysis and experimentation on the formal processes of meaning production, including the production of narrative, visual pleasure and subject positions, but rather that feminist theory should now engage precisely in the redefinition of aesthetic and formal knowledge, much as

6. Lea Melandri, *L'infamia originaria* (Milano: Edizioni L'Erba Voglio, 1977), p. 27; my translation. For a more fully developed discussion of semiotic theories of film and narrative, see Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

7. See Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" and "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), p. 96. Both essays are reprinted in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1984).

women's cinema has been engaged in the transformation of vision.

Take Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), a film about the routine, daily activities of a Belgian middle-class and middle-aged housewife, and a film where the pre-aesthetic is already fully aesthetic. This is not so, however, because of the beauty of its images, the balanced composition of its frames, the absence of the reverse shot, or the perfectly calculated editing of its still-camera shots into a continuous, logical and obsessive narrative space; but because it is a woman's actions, gestures, body, and look that define the space of our vision, the temporality and rhythms of perception, the horizon of meaning available to the spectator. So that narrative suspense is not built on the expectation of a "significant event," a socially momentous act (which actually occurs, though unexpectedly and almost incidentally, one feels, toward the end of the film), but is produced by the tiny slips in Jeanne's routine, the small forgettings, the hesitations between real-time gestures as common and "insignificant" as peeling potatoes, washing dishes or making coffee — and then not drinking it. What the film constructs — formally and artfully, to be sure — is a picture of female experience, of duration, perception, events, relationships and silences, which feels immediately and unquestionably true. And in this sense the "pre-aesthetic" is *aesthetic* rather than *aestheticized*, as it is in films like Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, Polanski's *Repulsion*, or Antonioni's *Eclipse*. To say the same thing in another way, Akerman's film addresses the spectator as female.

The effort, on the part of the filmmaker, to render a presence in the feeling of a gesture, to convey the sense of an experience that is subjective yet socially coded (and therefore recognizable), and to do so formally, working through her conceptual (one could say, theoretical) knowledge of film form, is averred by Chantal Akerman in an interview on the making of *Jeanne Dielman*: "I do think it's a feminist film because I give space to things which were never, almost never, shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman. They are the lowest in the hierarchy of film images . . . . But more than the content, it's because of the style. If you choose to show a woman's gestures so precisely, it's because you love them. In some way you recognize those gestures that have always been denied and ignored. I think that the real problem with women's films usually has nothing to do with the content. It's that hardly any women really have confidence enough to carry through on their feelings. Instead the content is the most simple and obvious thing. They deal with that and forget to look for formal ways to express what they are and what they want, their own rhythms, their own way of looking at things. A lot of women have unconscious contempt for their feelings. But I don't think I do. I have enough confidence in myself. So

that's the other reason why I think it's a feminist film — not just what it says but *what* is shown and *how* it's shown."<sup>8</sup>

This lucid statement of poetics resonates with my own response as a viewer and gives me something of an explanation as to why I recognize in those unusual film images, in those movements, those silences and those looks, the ways of an experience all but unrepresented, previously unseen in film, though lucidly and unmistakably apprehended here. And so the statement cannot be dismissed with commonplaces such as authorial intention or intentional fallacy. As another critic and spectator points out, there are “two logics” at work in this film, “two modes of the feminine”: character and director, image and camera, remain distinct yet interacting and mutually interdependent positions. Call them femininity and feminism, the one is made representable by the critical work of the other; the one is kept at a distance, constructed, “framed,” to be sure, and yet “respected,” “loved,” “given space” by the other.<sup>9</sup> The two “logics” remain separate: “the camera look can't be construed as the view of any character. Its interest extends beyond the fiction. The camera presents itself, in its evenness and predictability, as equal to Jeanne's precision. Yet the camera continues its logic throughout; Jeanne's order is disrupted, and with the murder the text comes to its logical end since Jeanne then stops altogether. If Jeanne has, symbolically, destroyed the phallus, its order still remains visible all around her.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, then, the space constructed by the film is not only a textual or filmic space of vision, in frame and off — for an off-screen space is still inscribed in the images, although not sutured narratively by the reverse shot but effectively reaching toward the historical and social determinants which define Jeanne's life and place her in her frame. But beyond that, the film's space is also a critical space of analysis, an horizon of possible meanings which includes or extends to the spectator (“extends beyond the fiction”) insofar as the spectator is

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8. “Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman*,” *Camera Obscura*, 2 (1977), 118-119.

9. In the same interview, Akerman said: “I didn't have any doubts about any of the shots. I was very sure of where to put the camera and when and why . . . I let her [the character] live her life in the middle of the frame. I didn't go in too close, but I was not very far away. I let her be in her space. It's not uncontrolled. But the camera was not voyeuristic in the commercial way because you always knew where I was . . . It was the only way to shoot that film — to avoid cutting the woman into a hundred pieces, to avoid cutting the action in a hundred places, to look carefully and to be respectful. The framing was meant to respect the space, her, and her gestures within it” (*Ibid.*, 119).

10. Janet Bergstrom, “*Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* by Chantal Akerman,” *Camera Obscura*, 2 (1977), 117. On the rigorous formal consistency of the film, see also Mary Jo Lakeland, “The Color of *Jeanne Dielman*,” *Camera Obscura*, 3-4 (1979), 216-218.

led to occupy at once the two positions, to follow the two “logics,” and to perceive them as equally and concurrently true.

In saying that a film whose visual and symbolic space is organized in this manner *addresses its spectator as a woman*, regardless of the gender of the viewers, I mean that the film defines all points of identification (with character, image, camera) as female, feminine, or feminist. However, this is not as simple or self-evident a notion as the established film-theoretical view of cinematic identification, namely, that identification with the look is masculine and identification with the image is feminine. It is not self-evident precisely because such a view — which indeed correctly explains the working of dominant cinema — is now accepted: that the camera (technology), the look (voyeurism), and the scopic drive itself partake of the phallic and thus somehow are entities or figures of a masculine nature.

How difficult it is to “prove” that a film addresses its spectator as female is brought home time and again in conversations or discussions between audiences and filmmakers. After a recent screening of *Redupers* in Milwaukee (January 1985), Helke Sander answered a question about the function of the Berlin wall in her film and concluded by saying, if I may paraphrase: “but of course the wall also represents another division that is specific to women.” She did not elaborate but, again, I felt that what she meant was clear and unmistakable. And so does at least one other critic and spectator, Kaja Silverman, who sees the wall as a division other in kind from what the wall would divide — and can’t, for things do “flow through the Berlin wall (TV and radio waves, germs, the writings of Christa Wolf)” and Edda’s photographs show the two Berlins in “their quotidian similarities rather than their ideological divergences.” “All three projects are motivated by the desire to tear down the wall, or at least to prevent it from functioning as the dividing line between two irreducible opposites . . . . *Redupers* makes the wall a signifier for psychic as well as ideological, political, and geographical boundaries. It functions there as a metaphor for sexual difference, for the subjective limits articulated by the existing symbolic order both in East and West. The wall thus designates the discursive boundaries which separate residents not only of the same country and language, but of the same partitioned space.”<sup>11</sup> Those of us who share Silverman’s perception must wonder whether in fact the sense of that other, specific division represented by the wall in *Redupers* (sexual difference, a discursive boundary, a subjective limit) is in the film or in our viewers’ eyes.

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11. Kaja Silverman, “Helke Sander and the Will to Change,” *Discourse*, 6 (Fall 1983), 10.

Is it actually there on screen, in the film, inscribed in its slow montage of long takes and in the stillness of the images in their silent frames; or is it rather in our perception, our insight, as — precisely — a subjective limit and discursive boundary (gender), an horizon of meaning (feminism) which is projected into the images, onto the screen, around the text? I think it is this other kind of division that is acknowledged in Christa Wolf's figure of "the divided heaven," for example, or in Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own": the feeling of an internal distance, a contradiction, a space of silence, which is there alongside the imaginary pull of cultural and ideological representations without denying or obliterating them. Women artists, filmmakers and writers acknowledge this division or difference by attempting to express it in their works. Spectators and readers think we find it in those texts. Nevertheless, even today, most of us would still agree with Silvia Bovenschen.

"For the time being," writes Gertrud Koch, "the issue remains whether films by women actually succeed in subverting this basic model of the camera's construction of the gaze, whether the female look through the camera at the world, at men, women and objects will be an essentially different one."<sup>12</sup> Posed in these terms, however, the issue will remain fundamentally a rhetorical question. I have suggested that the emphasis must be shifted away from the artist behind the camera, the gaze or the text as origin and determination of meaning, toward the wider public sphere of cinema as a social technology: we must develop our understanding of cinema's implication in other modes of cultural representation, and its possibilities of both production and counterproduction of social vision. I further suggest that, even as filmmakers are confronting the problems of transforming vision by engaging all of the codes of cinema, specific and non-specific, against the dominance of that "basic model," our task as theorists is to articulate the conditions and forms of vision for another social subject, and so to venture into the highly risky business of redefining aesthetic and formal knowledge.

Such a project evidently entails reconsidering and reassessing the early feminist formulations or, as Sheila Rowbotham summed it up, "look[ing] back at ourselves through our own cultural creations, our actions, our ideas, our pamphlets, our organization, our history, our theory."<sup>13</sup> And if we now can add "our films," perhaps the time has come to re-think women's cinema as the production of a feminist social vision. As a form of political critique or critical politics, and

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12. Gertrud Koch, "Ex-Changing the Gaze: Re-Visioning Feminist Film Theory," in this volume.

13. Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 28.

through the specific consciousness that women have developed to analyze the subject's relations to sociohistorical reality, feminism has not only invented new strategies or created new texts, but more importantly it has conceived a new social subject, women: as speakers, writers, readers, spectators, users and makers of cultural forms, shapers of cultural processes. The project of women's cinema, therefore, is no longer that of destroying or disrupting man-centered vision by representing its blind spots, its gaps or its repressed. The effort and challenge now are how to effect another vision: to construct other objects and subjects of vision, and to formulate the conditions of representability of another social subject. For the time being, then, feminist work in film seems necessarily focused on those subjective limits and discursive boundaries that mark women's division as gender-specific, a division more elusive, complex and contradictory than can be conveyed in the notion of sexual difference as it is currently used.

The idea that *a film may address the spectator as female*, rather than portray women positively or negatively, seems very important to me in the critical endeavor to characterize women's cinema as a cinema for, not only by, women. It is an idea not found in the critical writings I mentioned earlier, which are focused on the film, the object, the text. But rereading those essays today, one can see, and it is important to stress it, that the question of a filmic language or a feminine aesthetic has been articulated from the beginning in relation to the women's movement: "the new grows only out of the work of confrontation" (Mulvey, p. 4); women's "imagination constitutes the movement itself" (Bovenschen, p. 136); and in Claire Johnston's non-formalist view of women's cinema as counter-cinema, a feminist political strategy should reclaim, rather than shun, the use of film as a form of mass culture: "In order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film."<sup>14</sup>

Since the first women's film festivals in 1972 (New York, Edinburgh) and the first journal of feminist film criticism (*Women and Film*, published in Berkeley from 1972 to 1975), the question of women's expression has been one of both self-expression and communication with other women, a question at once of the creation/invention of new images and of the creation/imaging of new forms of community. If we

14. Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, ed. by Claire Johnston (London: SEFT, 1974), p. 31. See also Gertrud Koch, "Was ist und wozu brauchen wir eine feministische Filmkritik," *frauen und film*, 11 (1977).

re-think the problem of a specificity of women's cinema and aesthetic forms in this manner, in terms of address — who is making films for whom, who is looking and speaking, how, where, and to whom — then what has been seen as a rift, a division, an ideological split within feminist film culture between theory and practice, or between formalism and activism, may appear to be the very strength, the drive and productive heterogeneity of feminism. In their introduction to the recent collection, *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams point out: "If feminist work on film has grown increasingly theoretical, less oriented towards political action, this does not necessarily mean that theory itself is counter-productive to the cause of feminism, nor that the institutional form of the debates within feminism have simply reproduced a male model of academic competition . . . . Feminists sharing similar concerns collaborate in joint authorship and editorships, cooperative filmmaking and distribution arrangements. Thus, many of the political aspirations of the women's movement form an integral part of the very structure of feminist work in and on film."<sup>15</sup>

The "re-vision" of their title, borrowed from Adrienne Rich ("Re-vision — the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes," writes Rich, is for women "an act of survival"), refers to the project of reclaiming vision, of "seeing difference differently," of displacing the critical emphasis from "images of" women "to the axis of vision itself — to the modes of organizing vision and hearing which result in the production of that 'image'."<sup>16</sup> I agree with the *Re-Vision* editors when they say that over the past decade feminist theory has moved "from an analysis of difference as oppressive to a delineation and specification of difference as liberating, as offering the only possibility of radical change" (p. 12). But I believe that radical change requires that such specification not be limited to "sexual difference," that is to say, a difference of women from men, female from male, or Woman from Man. Radical change requires a delineation and a better understanding of the difference of women from Woman, and that is to say as well, *the differences among women*. For there are, after all, different histories of women. There are women who masquerade and women who wear the veil; women invisible to men, in their society, but also women who are invisible to other women, in our society.<sup>17</sup>

15. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, eds., *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), p. 4.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 6. The quotation from Adrienne Rich is in her *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), p. 35.

17. See Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. by Gloria

The invisibility of black women in white women's films, for instance, or of lesbianism in mainstream feminist criticism, is what Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983) most forcefully represents, while at the same time constructing the terms of their visibility as subjects and objects of vision. Set in a hypothetical near-future time and in a place very much like lower Manhattan, with the look of a documentary (after Chris Marker) and the feel of contemporary science fiction writing (the post-new-wave s-f of Samuel Delany, Joanna Russ, Alice Sheldon or Thomas Disch), *Born in Flames* shows how a "successful" social democratic cultural revolution, now into its tenth year, slowly but surely reverts to the old patterns of male dominance, politics as usual, and the traditional Left disregard for "women's issues." It is around this specific gender oppression, in its various forms, that several groups of women (black women, Latinas, lesbians, single mothers, intellectuals, political activists, spiritual and punk performers, and a Women's Army) succeed in mobilizing and joining together: not by ignoring but, paradoxically, by acknowledging their differences.

Like *Redupers* and *Jeanne Dielman*, Borden's film addresses the spectator as female, but it does not do so by portraying an experience which feels immediately one's own. On the contrary, its barely coherent narrative, its quick-paced shots and sound montage, the counterpoint of image and word, the diversity of voices and languages, and the self-conscious science-fictional frame of the story hold the spectator across a distance, projecting toward her its fiction like a bridge of difference. In short, what *Born in Flames* does for me, woman spectator, is exactly to allow me "to see difference differently," to look at women with eyes I've never had before and yet my own; for, as it remarks the emphasis (the words are Audre Lorde's) on the "interdependency of different strengths" in feminism, the film also inscribes the differences among women as *differences within women*.

*Born in Flames* addresses me as a woman and a feminist living in a particular moment of women's history, the United States today. The film's events and images take place in what science fiction calls a parallel universe, a time and a place elsewhere that look and feel like here and now, yet are not, just as I (and all women) live in a culture that is and is not our own. In that unlikely, but not impossible universe of the film's fiction, the women come together in the very struggle that divides and differentiates them. Thus what it portrays for me, what elicits my identification with the film and gives me, spectator, a place in it, is the contradiction of my own history and the personal/political difference within myself.

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T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1982).

“The relationship between history and so-called subjective processes,” says Helen Fehervary in a recent discussion of women’s film in Germany, “is not a matter of grasping the truth in history as some objective entity, but in finding the truth of the experience. Evidently, this kind of experiential immediacy has to do with women’s own history and self-consciousness.”<sup>18</sup> That, how, and why our histories and our consciousness are different, divided, even conflicting, is what women’s cinema can analyze, articulate, reformulate. And, in so doing, it can help us create something else to be, as Toni Morrison says of her two heroines: “Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be.”<sup>19</sup>

In the following pages I will refer often to *Born in Flames*, discussing some of the issues it has raised, but it will not be with the aim of a textual analysis. Rather I will take it as the starting point, as indeed it was for me, of a series of reflections on the topic of this essay.

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Again it is a film, and a filmmaker’s project, that bring home to me with greater clarity the question of difference, this time in relation to factors other than gender, notably race and class — a question endlessly debated within marxist feminism and recently rearticulated by women of color in feminist presses and publications. That this question should reemerge urgently and irrevocably now, is not surprising, at a time when severe social regression and economic pressures (the so-called “feminization of poverty”) belie the self-complacency of a liberal feminism enjoying its modest allotment of institutional legitimation. A sign of the times, the recent crop of commercial, man-made “woman’s films” (*Lianna*, *Personal Best*, *Silkwood*, *Frances*, *Places of the Heart*, etc.) is undoubtedly “authorized,” and made financially viable, by that legitimation. But the success, however modest, of this liberal feminism has been bought at the price of reducing the contradictory complexity — and the theoretical productivity — of concepts such as sexual difference, the personal is political, and feminism itself to simpler and more acceptable ideas already existing in the dominant culture. Thus, to many today, “sexual difference” is hardly more than sex (biology) or gender (in the simplest sense of female socialization) or the

18. Helen Fehervary, Claudia Lenssen, and Judith Mayne, “From Hitler to Hepburn: A Discussion of Women’s Film Production and Reception,” *New German Critique*, 24-25 (Fall/Winter 1981-2), 176.

19. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 44.

basis for certain private “life styles” (homosexual and other non-orthodox relationships); “the personal is political” all too often translates into “the personal instead of the political”; and “feminism” is unhesitatingly appropriated, by the academy as well as the media, as a discourse — a variety of social criticism, a method of aesthetic or literary analysis among others, and more or less worth attention according to the degree of its market appeal to students, readers, or viewers. And, yes, a discourse perfectly accessible to all men of good will. In this context, issues of race or class must continue to be thought of as mainly sociological or economic, and hence parallel to but not dependent on gender, implicated with but not determining of subjectivity, and of little relevance to this “feminist discourse” which, as such, would have no competence in the matter but only, and at best, a humane or “progressive” concern with the disadvantaged.

The relevance of feminism (without quotation marks) to race and class, however, is very explicitly stated by those women of color, black, and white who are not the recipients but rather the “targets” of equal opportunity, who are outside or not fooled by liberal “feminism,” or who understand that feminism is nothing if it is not at once political and personal, with all the contradictions and difficulties that entails. To such feminists it is clear that the social construction of gender, subjectivity, and the relations of representation to experience, do occur within race and class as much as they occur in language and culture, often indeed across languages, cultures, and sociocultural apparatus. Thus not only is it the case that the notion of gender, or “sexual difference,” cannot be simply accommodated into the preexisting, ungendered (or male-gendered) categories by which the official discourses on race and class have been elaborated; but it is equally the case that the issues of race and class cannot be simply subsumed under some larger category labelled femaleness, femininity, womanhood or, in the final instance, Woman. What is becoming more and more clear, instead, is that all the categories of our social science stand to be reformulated *starting from* the notion of gendered social subjects. And something of this process of reformulation — re-vision, rewriting, rereading, rethinking, “looking back at *ourselves*” — is what I see inscribed in the texts of women’s cinema but not yet sufficiently focused in feminist film theory or feminist critical practice in general. This point, like the relation of feminist writing to the women’s movement, demands a much lengthier discussion than can be undertaken here. I can do no more than sketch the problem as it strikes me with unusual intensity in the reception of Lizzie Borden’s film and my own response to it.

What *Born in Flames* succeeds in representing is this feminist understanding: that the female subject is en-gendered, constructed and

defined in gender across multiple representations of class, race, language and social relations; and that, therefore, differences among women are differences *within* women, which is why feminism can exist despite those differences and, as we are just beginning to understand, can only continue to exist because of them. The originality of this film's project is its representation of woman as a social subject and a site of differences; differences which are not purely sexual or merely racial, economic, or (sub)cultural, but all of these together and often enough in conflict with one another. What one takes away after seeing this film is the image of a heterogeneity in the female social subject, the sense of a distance from dominant cultural models and of an internal division within women that remain, not in spite of but concurrently with the provisional unity of any concerted political action. Just as the film's narrative remains unresolved, fragmented, and difficult to follow, heterogeneity and difference within women remain in our memory as the film's narrative image, its work of representing, which cannot be collapsed into a fixed identity, a sameness of all women as Woman, or a representation of Feminism as a coherent and available image.

Other films, in addition to the ones already mentioned, have effectively represented that internal division or distance from language, culture and self that I see recur, figuratively and thematically, in recent women's cinema (it is also represented, for example, in Gabriella Rosaleva's *Processo a Caterina Ross* and in Lynne Tillman and Sheila McLaughlin's *Committed*). But *Born in Flames* projects that division on a larger social and cultural scale, taking up nearly all of the issues and putting them all at stake. As we read on the side of the (stolen) U-Haul trucks which carry the free women's new mobile radio transmitter, reborn as Phoenix-Regazza (girl phoenix) from the flames that destroyed the two separate stations, the film is "an adventure in moving." As one reviewer saw it, "An action pic, a sci-fi fantasy, a political thriller, a collage film, a snatch of the underground: *Born in Flames* is all and none of these . . . Edited in 15-second bursts and spiked with yards of flickering video transfers . . . *Born in Flames* stands head and shoulders above such Hollywood reflections on the media as *Absence of Malice*, *Network*, or *Under Fire*. This is less a matter of its substance (the plot centers on the suspicious prison "suicide," à la Ulrike Meinhoff, of Women's Army leader Adelaide Norris) than of its form, seizing on a dozen facets of our daily media surroundings."<sup>20</sup> The words of the last sentence, echoing Akerman's emphasis on form rather than content, are in turn echoed by Borden in several printed statements.

She, too, is keenly concerned with her own relation as filmmaker to filmic representation ("Two things I was committed to with the film

20. Kathleen Hulser, "Les Guérillères," *Afterimage*, 11:6 (January 1984), 14.

were questioning the nature of narrative . . . and creating a process whereby I could release myself from my own bondage in terms of class and race”).<sup>21</sup> And she, too, like Akerman, is confident that vision can be transformed because hers has been: “whatever discomfort I might have felt as a white filmmaker working with black women has been over for so long. It was exorcized by the process of making the film.” Thus, in response to the interviewer’s (Anne Friedberg) suggestion that the film is “progressive” precisely because it “demands a certain discomfort for the audience, and forces the viewer to confront his or her own political position(s) (or lack of political position),” Borden flatly rejects the interviewer’s implicit assumption: “I don’t think the audience is solely a white middle-class audience. What was important for me was creating a film in which that was *not* the only audience. The problem with much of the critical material on the film is that it assumes a white middle-class reading public for articles written about a film that they assume has only a white middle-class audience. I’m very confused about the discomfort that reviewers feel. What I was trying to do (and using humor as a way to try to do it) was to have various positions in which everyone had a place on some level. Every woman — with men it is a whole different question — would have some level of identification with a position within the film. Some reviewers over-identified with something as a privileged position. Basically, none of the positioning of black characters was *against* any of the white viewers but more of an invitation: come and work with us. Instead of telling the viewer that he or she could *not* belong, the viewer was supposed to be a repository for all these different points of view and all these different styles of rhetoric. Hopefully, one would be able to identify with one position but be able to evaluate all of the various positions presented in the film. Basically, I feel this discomfort only from people who are deeply resistant to it.”<sup>22</sup>

This response is one that, to my mind, sharply outlines a shift in women’s cinema from a modernist or avant-garde aesthetic of subversion to an emerging set of questions about filmic representation to which the term “aesthetic” may or may not apply, depending on one’s definition of art, one’s definition of cinema, and the relationship between the two. Similarly, whether or not the terms “postmodern” or “postmodernist aesthetic” would be preferable or more applicable in

21. Anne Friedberg, “An Interview with Filmmaker Lizzie Borden,” *Women and Performance*, vol. 1:2 (Winter 1984), 43. On the effort to understand one’s relation as a feminist to racial and cultural differences, see Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith, *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Long Haul Press, 1984).

22. Interview in *Women and Performance*, 38.

this context, as Craig Owens has suggested of the work of other women artists, is too large a topic to be discussed here.<sup>23</sup> At any rate, as I see it, there has been a shift in women's cinema from an aesthetic centered on the text and *its* effects on the viewing or reading subject — whose certain, if imaginary, self-coherence is to be fractured by the text's own disruption of linguistic, visual and/or narrative coherence — 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.<sup>24</sup> An explicit concern with the audience is of course not new in either art or cinema, since Pirandello and Brecht in the former, and always conspicuously present in Hollywood and TV. What is new here, however, is the particular conception of the audience, which now is envisaged in its heterogeneity and otherness from the text.

That the audience is conceived as a heterogeneous community is made apparent, in Borden's film, by its unusual handling of the function of address. The use of music and beat in conjunction with spoken language, from rap singing to a variety of subcultural lingos and non-standard speech, serves less the purposes of documentation or cinema vérité than those of what in another context might be called characterization: they are there to provide a means of identification of and with the characters, though not the kind of psychological identification usually accorded to main characters or privileged "protagonists." "I wanted to make a film that different audiences could relate to on different levels — if they wanted to ignore the language they could," Borden told another interviewer, "but not to make a film that was anti-language."<sup>25</sup> The importance of "language" and its constitutive presence in both the public and the private spheres is underscored by the multiplicity of discourses and communication technologies — visual, verbal, and aural — foregrounded in the form as well as the content of the film. If the wall of official speech, the omnipresent systems of public address, and the very strategy of the women's takeover of a television station assert the fundamental link of communication and power, the film also insists on representing the other, unofficial social

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23. Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983) pp. 57-82. See also Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," *New German Critique*, 33 (Fall 1984), 5-52.

24. Borden's non-professional actors, as well as her characters, are very much part of the film's intended audience: "I didn't want the film caught in the white film ghetto. I did mailings. We got women's lists, black women's lists, gay lists, lists that would bring different people to the Film Forum . . ." (Interview in *Women and Performance*, 43).

25. Betsy Sussler, "Interview," *Bomb*, 7 (1983), 29.

discourses, their heterogeneity, and *their* constitutive effects vis-à-vis the social subject.

In this respect, I would argue, both the characters and the spectators of Borden's film are positioned in relation to social discourses and representations (of class, race, and gender) within particular "subjective limits and discursive boundaries" that are analogous, in their own historical specificity, to those which Silverman saw symbolized by the Berlin wall in *Redupers*. For the spectators, too, are limited in their vision and understanding, bound by their own social and sexual positioning, as their "discomfort" or diverse responses suggest. Borden's avowed intent to make the spectator a locus ("a repository") of different points of view and discursive configurations ("these different styles of rhetoric") suggests to me that the concept of a heterogeneity of the audience also entails a heterogeneity of, or in, the individual spectator.

If, as claimed by recent theories of textuality, the Reader or the Spectator is implied in the text as an effect of its strategy — either as the figure of a unity or coherence of meaning which is constructed by the text ("the text of pleasure"), or as the figure of the division, dissemination, incoherence inscribed in the "text of jouissance" — then the spectator of *Born in Flames* is somewhere else, resistant to the text and other from it. This film's spectator is not only *not* sutured into a "classic" text by narrative and psychological identification; nor is it bound in the time of repetition, "at the limit of any fixed subjectivity, materially inconstant, dispersed in process," as Stephen Heath aptly describes the spectator intended by avant-garde (structural-materialist) film.<sup>26</sup> What happens is, this film's spectator is finally not liable to capture by the text. Yet one is engaged by the film's powerful erotic charge, one responds to the erotic investment that its female characters have in each other, and the filmmaker in them, with something that is neither pleasure nor jouissance, oedipal or pre-oedipal, as the terms have been defined for us, but with something that is again (as in *Jeanne Dielman*) a recognition, unmistakable and unprecedented. Again the textual space extends to the spectator, in its erotic and critical dimensions, addressing, speaking-to, making room, but not (how very unusual and remarkable) cajoling, soliciting, seducing. These films do not put me in the place of the female spectator, do not assign me a role, a self-image, a positionality in language or desire. Instead, they make a place for what I will call me, knowing that I don't know it, and give "me" space to try to know, to see, to understand. Put another way, by addressing me as *a* woman, they do not bind me or appoint me as

26. Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 167.

Woman.

The “discomfort” of Borden’s reviewers might be located exactly in this dis-appointment of spectator and text: the disappointment of not finding oneself, not finding oneself “interpellated” or solicited by the film, whose images and discourses project back to the viewer a space of heterogeneity, differences and fragmented coherences that just do not add up to one individual viewer or one spectator-subject, bourgeois or otherwise. There is no one-to-one match between the film’s discursive heterogeneity and the discursive boundaries of any one spectator. We are at once invited in and held at a distance, addressed intermittently and only insofar as we are able to occupy the position of addressee; for example when Honey, the Phoenix Radio disk jockey, addresses to the audience the words: “Black women, be ready. White women, get ready. Red women, stay ready, for this is our time and all must realize it.”<sup>27</sup> Which individual member of the audience, male or female, can feel singly interpellated as spectator-subject or, in other words, unequivocally addressed?

There is a famous moment in film history, something of a parallel to this, which not coincidentally has been “discovered” by feminist film critics in a woman-made film about women, Dorothy Arzner’s *Dancē, Girl, Dance*: it is the moment when Judy interrupts her stage performance and, facing the vaudeville audience, steps out of her role and speaks to them as a woman to a group of people. The novelty of this direct address, feminist critics have noted, is not only that it breaks the codes of theatrical illusion and voyeuristic pleasure, but that it demonstrates that no complicity, no shared discourse can be established between the woman performer (positioned as image, representation, object) and the male audience (positioned as the controlling gaze); no complicity, that is, outside the codes and rules of the performance. By breaking the codes, Arzner revealed the rules and the relations of power that constitute them and are in turn sustained by them. And sure enough, the vaudeville audience in her film showed great discomfort with Judy’s speech.

I am suggesting that the discomfort with Honey’s speech is also to do with codes of representation (of race and class as well as gender) and the rules and power relations that sustain them — rules which also prevent the establishing of a shared discourse, and hence the “dream” of a common language. How else could viewers see in this playful, exuberant, science-fictional film a blueprint for political action which, they claim, wouldn’t work anyway? (“We’ve all been through this before. As

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27. The script of *Born in Flames* is published in *Heresies*, 16 (1983), 12-16. Borden discusses how the script was developed in conjunction with the actors and according to their particular abilities and backgrounds in the interview in *Bomb*.

a man I'm not threatened by this because we know that this doesn't work. This is infantile politics, these women are being macho like men used to be macho . . . .")<sup>28</sup> Why else would they see the film, in Friedberg's phrase, "as a *prescription* through fantasy"? Borden's opinion is that "people have not really been upset about class and race . . . . People are really upset that the women are gay. They feel it is separatist."<sup>29</sup> My own opinion is that people are upset with all three, class, race, and gender — lesbianism being precisely the demonstration that the concept of gender is founded across race and class on the structure which Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig have called, respectively, "compulsory heterosexuality" and "the heterosexual contract."<sup>30</sup>

The film-theoretical notion of spectatorship has been developed largely in the attempt to answer the question posed insistently by feminist theorists and well summed up in the words of Ruby Rich already cited (above): "how does one formulate an understanding of a structure that insists on our absence even in the face of our presence?" In keeping with the early divergence of feminists over the politics of images, the notion of spectatorship was developed along two axes: one starting from the psychoanalytic theory of the subject and employing concepts such as primary and secondary, conscious and unconscious, imaginary and symbolic processes; the other starting from sexual difference and asking questions like, how does the female spectator see?, with what does she identify?, where/how/in what film genres is female desire represented?, and so on. Arzner's infraction of the code in *Dance, Girl, Dance* was one of the first answers in this second line of questioning, which now appears to have been the most fruitful by far for women's cinema. *Born in Flames* seems to me to work out the most interesting answer to date.

For one thing, the film assumes that the female spectator may be black, white, red, middle-class or not middle-class, and wants her to have a place within the film, some measure of identification — "identification with a position," Borden specifies. "With men [spectators] it is a whole different question," she adds, obviously without much interest in exploring it (though later suggesting that black male spectators responded to the film "because they don't see it as just about women. They see it as empowerment").<sup>31</sup> In sum, the spectator is addressed as female in gender and multiple or heterogeneous in race

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28. Interview in *Bomb*, 29.

29. Interview in *Women and Performance*, 39.

30. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs*, (Summer 1980), 631-660; Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," *Feminist Issues* (Summer 1980), 103-111.

31. Interview in *Women and Performance*, 38.

and class; which is to say, here too all points of identification are female or feminist, but rather than the “two logics” of character and filmmaker, like *Jeanne Dielman, Born in Flames* foregrounds their different discourses.

Secondly, as Friedberg puts it in one of her questions, the images of women in *Born in Flames* are “unaestheticized”: “you never fetishize the body through masquerade. In fact the film seems consciously de-aestheticized, which is what gives it its documentary quality.”<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, to some, those images of women appear to be extraordinarily beautiful. If this were to be the case for most of the film’s female spectators, however socially positioned, we would be facing what amounts to a film-theoretical paradox, for in film theory the female body is construed precisely as fetish or masquerade.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps not unexpectedly, the filmmaker’s response is amazingly consonant with Chantal Akerman’s, though their films are visually quite different and the latter’s is in fact received as an “aesthetic” work. Borden: “The important thing is to shoot female bodies in a way that they have never been shot before . . . . I chose women for the stance I liked. The stance is almost like the gestalt of a person.”<sup>34</sup> And Akerman (cited above): “I give space to things which were never, almost never, shown in that way . . . . If you choose to show a woman’s gestures so precisely, it’s because you love them.”

The point of this crossreferencing of two films that have little else in common beside the feminism of their makers is to remark the persistence of certain themes and formal questions about representation and difference which I *would* call aesthetic, and which are the historical product of feminism and the expression of feminist critical-theoretical thought. Like the works of the feminist filmmakers I have referred to, and many others too numerous to mention here, *Jeanne Dielman* and *Born in Flames* are engaged in the project of transforming vision by inventing the forms and processes of representation of a social subject, women, who until now has been all but unrepresentable; a project already set out (looking back, one is tempted to say, programmatically) in the title of Yvonne Rainer’s *Film About a Woman Who . . .* (1974), which in a sense all of these films continue to re-elaborate.

The gender-specific division of women in language, the distance from official culture, the urge to imagine new forms of community as well as to create new images (“creating something else to be”), and the consciousness of a “subjective factor” at the core of all kinds of work —

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32. *Ibid.*, 44.

33. See Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” *Screen*, 23:3-4 (Sept./Oct. 1982), 74-87.

34. Interview in *Women and Performance*, 44-45.

domestic, industrial, artistic, critical or political work — are some of the themes articulating the particular relations of subjectivity, meaning and experience which en-gender the social subject as female. These themes, encapsulated in the phrase “the personal is political,” have been formally explored in women’s cinema in several ways: through the disjunction of image and voice, the reworking of narrative space, the elaboration of strategies of address that alter the forms and balances of traditional representation. From the inscription of subjective space and duration inside the frame (a space of repetitions, silences, and discontinuities in *Jeanne Dielman*) to the construction of other discursive social spaces (the heterogeneous but intersecting spaces of the women’s “networks” in *Born in Flames*), women’s cinema has undertaken a redefinition of both private and public space that may well answer the call for “a new language of desire” and may actually have met the demand for the “destruction of visual pleasure,” if by that one alludes to the traditional, classical and modernist, canons of aesthetic representation.

So, once again, the contradiction of women in language and culture is manifested in a paradox: most of the terms by which we speak of the construction of the female social subject in cinematic representation bear in their visual form the prefix “de-” to signal the deconstruction or the destructuring, if not destruction, of the very thing to be represented. We speak of the deaestheticization of the female body, the desexualization of violence, the deoedipalization of narrative, and so forth. Rethinking women’s cinema in this way, I may provisionally answer Bovenschen’s question thus: there is a certain configuration of issues and formal problems that have been consistently articulated in what we call women’s cinema. The way in which they have been expressed and developed, both artistically and critically, seems to point less to a “feminine aesthetic” than to a feminist *deaesthetic*. And if the word sounds awkward or inelegant to you . . .