

On (Experimental) Film

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What is the relationship between feminist film/film theory and avant-garde film? How have their developments intertwined, paralleled, conflicted with and/or informed each other?

At a Ryerson Kodak Chair presentation in Toronto recently Yvonne Rainer was questioned on the memorial dedication to Hollis Frampton that comes at the end of her film *The Man Who Erased Women*. In response, she mentioned her friendship with Hollis and his influence in terms of her interest and use of language in film. Is Yvonne Rainer more a part of an avant-garde film tradition or more feminist — this last film has certainly been discussed in terms of the latter — or are “feminism” and “avant-garde” not mutually exclusive so “or” is inappropriate, or are these questions irrelevant and/or counter-productive in themselves?

Several years ago during International Women's Year I was invited to speak on a panel on Women in Experimental Film. At that time, I stated, rather glibly, that if one assigned genders to genres, experimental film would be feminine, non-patriarchal in relation to Hollywood's masculine patriarchal. I pointed to experimental film's position outside and often countering the dominant cinema, to its personal nature (made by an individual not a company, of personal motivation and often content — cf. Jonas Mekas' notions of avant-garde and “home-movies” as of the personal, heart, soul, home) and how experimental movies are often made in the filmmakers' basements or kitchens — like much women's art.

Now in the midst of reading Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror* this thought has come again for other reasons. Silverman identifies strategies of narrative film (short/reverse shot plus synchronous sound) which, in assuring an impression of reality, succeed in covering over loss, absence (=male fear of castration).

Experimental films do not generally employ these strategies and the films which do, generally call attention to them and reveal the site of production. Brakhage's *Faust* film shows us the lights on the set/home; Yvonne Rainer interrupts the diegetic space with direct address to the audience (“will all menstruating females please leave the audience”); Bruce Elder uses obviously fake sets and costumes in the dramatic, sync-sound segments of *Lamentations*.

This refusal of experimental film to allow for an impression of reality, and with that the satisfaction for the audience in a “secondary identification” and the relief of a “seeming safe place” in which the male spectator is screened from loss or the fear of loss, may account in some measure, too, for the relative lack of popularity of experimental film.

In terms of audience then might one think that female viewers would be more receptive to experimental film? This assumption, however, would (as I understand it) be mistaking the use of gender by attaching it to specific persons. For the audience position is a function of the apparatus of cinema and in Hollywood or classic cinema, at least, the audience is male. So where does that leave women and experimental film?

Later in *The Acoustic Mirror* Silverman, in a discussion of J. Kristeva's notion of the “chora”, mentions the avant-garde. “Significantly, however, Kristeva has been obliged to look rather for a field for these ostensible ‘feminine’ eruptions, passing over all the varied texts to have been inscribed with a female signature in favour of the (male) avant-garde. Thus, we learn that although the symbolic attempts to negate the chora, the maternal substratum of subjectivity surfaces in carnivalesque, surrealist, psychotic and ‘poetic’ language.”

Does Silverman's bracketing the word “male” before “avant-garde” indicate that avant-garde is male despite and including the female practitioners? Or does it mean that she (and Kristeva) refer here only to male avant-garde filmmakers who seem to predominate in numbers and who certainly dominate the history?

What of Carol Schneemann, Marie Menken, Joyce Wieland? When Silverman, in the chapter “Disembodying the Female Voice”, refers to women filmmakers, she uses Yvonne Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who...* and Patricia Gruben's *Sifted Evidence*. Both these filmmakers are introduced in the chapter as feminist; both are included, in other accountings, with the avant-garde.

In an article in *The New German Critique* (Winter 85) entitled “Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema”, Teresa de Lauretis refers to Laura Mulvey's identification of “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. . . This was followed by a second movement in which the concern with the language of representation as such became predominant. . . Thus, it was argued, that in order to counter the aesthetic of realism. . . avant-garde and feminist filmmakers must take an oppositional stance to narrative ‘illusionism’ and in favour of formalism.”

But de Lauretis goes on in this article to “shift the terms of the question” and aims of feminist theory to a “redefinition of aesthetic and formal knowledge” and, in so doing, she distinguishes between male avant-garde film artists such as Brakhage, Snow, Godard and women filmmakers such as Rainer, Ackerman, Duras. (I guess I could ask again here how Wieland, Menken, Schneemann fit?)

De Lauretis continues to develop from a ‘feminine aesthetic’ to ‘unaesthetic’ to a notion of a feminist ‘de-aesthetic’ — a term which, for me at least, really clicked in terms of the look of images in my films. I am a woman, a feminist in living, and an experimental or avant-garde filmmaker. Do I fit somewhere?