

LOOKING AT THE PAST FROM THE PRESENT: RETHINKING FEMINIST FILM
THEORY OF THE 1970s

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At the heart of this paper lies a question about the relation between history and ideas. Looking back at the 1970s, I want to reflect on not only the way in which feminist film theory arose in Britain but also on why it took on the aesthetic and ideological inflection that it did. Why was British feminist film theory so concerned with Hollywood cinema? Why did this concern with popular, mass cinema then shift radically towards avant—garde film? What was the ultimate fate of these movements? While it is quite usual to analyze a film and its production within its historical context, ideas are very often left detached from the intellectual and cultural climate within which they were articulated. Theory very often emerges, to put it dramatically, as transcendent, universal and eternal. In the case of 1970s feminism, this may be due, on the one hand, to the stylistic demands of rhetoric and feminist film theory's political engagement. On the other hand, it may be due to the impact that the new interest in theory had on the intellectual imagination of the 70s generation more generally. For instance, my article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' was published in 1975 and acquired an emblematic status for the convergence of film with feminist influenced thought, particularly psychoanalytic theory. Here, I want to sketch in some background to the development of feminist film theory in Britain during the 1970s and to suggest that understanding ideas within their historical context enhances rather than diminishes them.

First, engagement with Hollywood cinema was central to the development of British feminist theory and it was the Hollywood aesthetic that enabled its characteristic application of psychoanalytic theory to popular cinema. This emphasis on Hollywood needs to be understood within the development of film theory earlier and more generally in Britain during the 1960s. While critical challenges to an opposition between high and low cultures were neither restricted to Britain nor to film criticism alone, in British film culture debates were closely tied to the 'problem of America'. To sketch this background, I am going to begin this paper with a step further back, beyond the arrival of feminist film

theory in the 70s, to the context within which film theory took root in Britain in the 1960s.

Secondly, I have been arguing, in several papers over the last few years, that the last decades of the twentieth century saw a plethora of change across many social, economic, technological and cultural spheres. Out of this new conjuncture, cultural, theoretical and critical priorities have changed and such a radically altered context should necessarily affect film theory. The last section of my paper attempts to look at the cinema of the past from this new perspective. Thus, the political priority for me in the 1970s, the analysis of Hollywood in terms of voyeurism, the exposure of woman as spectacle as a key signifier within an aesthetic and ideological system, has mutated into other political and aesthetic questions.

I. Theory and historical context: British cinephiles turn to Hollywood.

In the early 1960s, critical approaches to cinema began to change in Britain. The key intellectual influence on this new criticism came from across the Channel, from Paris, but its chosen cinema came from across the Atlantic, from Hollywood. The intellectual and political context in which 'cinephilia' developed in Britain differed from that of Paris and its cultural legacies also diverged. While a number of the *Cahier du Cinema* critics who championed Hollywood went on to become the directors of the French New Wave, in Britain cinephilia led rather to a revolution in film culture and ultimately to the establishment of film as an academic discipline. To my mind, the British developments need to be understood within a political framework. During the 1960s, the New Left took a radical stand against the 'Englishness' of English culture and its traditional values. Not all the new generation of cinephiles took this stand and an outstanding exception was the important critic Robin Wood. It was, however, the New Left influenced anti-English cinephilia that provided an important backdrop for the film feminism that developed during the next decade.

Since the 1920s, the English Establishment had perceived American popular culture as a threat to national cultural wellbeing¹. In this context, to accept, and even love, American popular cinema was to challenge this hierarchy and its cultural values that not only revolved around a traditional opposition between ‘high’ and ‘low’ but were also generally parochial and verging on the philistine. Hollywood clearly represented everything that this culture sought to exclude. The specificity of English culture and Englishness had to be preserved from American popular culture and, particularly, its foremost instrument of penetration, Hollywood cinema with its potentially dangerous influence on the ‘uneducated classes’. Both the political left and right tended to share this cultural nationalism. But some left intellectuals in the late 1920s began to take Hollywood films seriously as part of an anti-Establishment ‘Americanitis’. When, in the 1960s a new generation of English critics began to write about Hollywood, the challenge was more to the traditions of the literature and criticism that had grown up in the ‘provinces’ during the 1950s in opposition to elite, metropolitan English culture. An interest that combined French intellectual influences, Hollywood cinema and the avant—garde stood in direct opposition to the ‘Englishness’ represented by the criticism of F.R. Leavis and the novels and plays of the Angry Young Men. This cultural turn was one aspect of a more general attack on English cultural complacency and insularity.

Most crucially, taking Hollywood seriously represented a stand not only against the cultural values and traditions of English literary criticism but also against their influence on film criticism. Here again, a move taken by the French was imported but acquired new implications in Britain. In the 1950s, *Cahier du Cinema* rejected French critically acclaimed cinema for its over literary values, based on the worth of the script and associated novelistic qualities of plot and character. In contrast, *Cahiers* looked for and celebrated the specifically cinematic. Their pantheon of Hollywood directors had worked in near industrial conditions, often moving from genre to genre, from formula to formula, working with stars rather than sophisticated characterization, often accepting the studios’ iron rule of the happy end. Only the director’s command over the language of cinema itself could transcend these conditions. Script and dialogue were abandoned as aesthetic criteria to be replaced by mise-en-scene, lighting, camera movement, colour,

and sound as such (which would include voice and word rather than linguistically carried meaning). This was the basis for *Cahier du Cinema's politique des auteurs*. However, the critical approach to Hollywood that reassessed the director's creative input was not a sufficiently sophisticated critical system to fill the gap left by high cultural criticism and traditions. It remained descriptive rather than analytic. Literary theory, in turn, was not an appropriate critical tool for the analysis of this popular entertainment, for application to the cinema's sound and image and was irrelevant to the aesthetics of Hollywood.

Both in France and in Britain, the problem of Hollywood was a key point of reference for the development of film theory. In France, for instance, Raymond Bellour drew on Hollywood cinema for his pioneering work with psychoanalytic theory, structuralism and textual analysis ². However, in Britain, importing French theory and applying, for instance, semiotics or narrative theory to Hollywood cinema had a culturally radical implication that was necessarily absent elsewhere in Europe. The combination of American popular culture with French ideas doubled the anti-English dimensions of an approach that was deeply culturally contentious as well as being critically innovative. By and large, support for Hollywood cinema as aesthetically valuable had a radical dimension in Britain. But in the later 60s, American foreign policy soured left attitudes to the United States and changes in world cinema affected attitudes to Hollywood. The waning of the 'critical romance' with Hollywood by the end of the 60s was due partly to the decline of the studio system itself. But it was also a result of European anti-imperialism which had begun to shift away from the Old World, struggles against colonialism, towards the US and most particularly its involvement in Vietnam. At the same time, by the late 60s, it began to be possible to see new kinds of cinema in London, as films of Cinema Novo, for instance, came into distribution and the London Filmmakers' Co-op began to show work from New American Cinema and other avant-gardes.

2. The origins of feminist film theory and its historical context.

- a. The influence of Hollywood cinema: psychoanalysis and semiotics.

Despite the waning of critical and theoretical interest in Hollywood by the early 1970s, feminist film theory staged a return to its cinema this time analyzing the iconography of woman on the screen as sign and symptom of women's place within the patriarchal order. While that place remained socially unspoken and unanalyzed, representations of women, fetishized and circulated as signifier of sexuality, could open up a conduit to fantasies that charged popular culture and its representations. It was precisely the popular nature of Hollywood cinema, its aspiration to capture the imagination of its vast audience, its industrial, mass output that made it so fascinating to feminist theorists. However, feminist film theorists still operated with the tradition of the *politique des auteurs* and, by and large, the directors whose work was held to be most revealing were also the directors who were most valued aesthetically.

The Women's Movement introduced a new political vocabulary of sexuality and the body that would affect the development of feminist film theory. It was a logical step to move from the politics of the female body to a politics of its representation. But that step, echoing the challenge posed to criticism by Hollywood cinema, also demanded a new conceptual framework that would allow images of women to be analyzed as sign and symptom. Psychoanalytic theory and semiotics provided the intellectual framework that effectively shifted the 'images of women' question away, from any literal correspondence with a given 'reality' to the invisible but still inescapable reality of the unconscious and its signifiers. Of particular importance was the influence of psychoanalytic theory. Socialist feminists in Britain had begun to read Freud during the early 1970s and to take him seriously against the grain of much of mainstream, particularly American, feminism. Freud identified sexuality as a key factor constituting the individual subject, its desire and repression. But, however unique individual experiences and encounters might be, structures of sexuality ultimately belonged to the encompassing framework of society. Thus, Freud identified the Oedipus Complex as both individual and also structural to social organization and its taboos. For feminists, this theoretical approach seemed to highlight the political importance of gender as a construct, removing from the realm of the natural, the universal and immutable. Although Freud had blind spots concerning femininity that he himself occasionally acknowledged, the theoretical tools offered by

psychoanalysis seemed to offer feminists a point of entry into the psyche and the place of gender and sexuality within it. Freud, for instance, illuminated the traumatic father/son relationship within which the mother must be essentially relegated to a subordinate position. And through his theory of castration anxiety, feminists could begin to conceptualize the psychic origins of patriarchal oppression and denigration of women. For feminists interested in the cinema, these structures, unconscious as they may be in the individual psyche, could be discovered circulating endlessly through myth and narrative, in image and iconography, within the stories and representations of popular culture.

For those women, myself included, whose engagement with cinema had been moulded by the cinephilia of the 1960s, Hollywood cinema was an inevitable object of analysis, if from an iconoclastic rather than a celebratory perspective. Two points converge here. Given our legacy of cinephile fascination, Hollywood was not an object of cultural disdain, but understood to be a rich and complex cinema that supremely reflected, and in turn affected, the place of women within the circulation and consumption of stories and images. Secondly, the studio system cinema would prove to be supremely suitable for psychoanalytic and semiotic analysis. Woman as spectacle and narratives of desire were right at the heart of studio system Hollywood and it was reflection on these aspects of its cinema that gave rise to my essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. Although facing each other from opposite poles, Hollywood and feminism had common concerns. As feminist theory moved beyond denunciation of the eroticisation of the female body and towards analyses of what that eroticisation signified for the 'patriarchal unconscious', Hollywood continued to be a rich source of material. Just as in the previous decade, ideas taken from structuralism, from Levi-Strauss's work on myth, had enabled analysis of the Western, so Claire Johnston and Pam Cook made use of his ideas to demonstrate the place of woman as 'sign of exchange'. Theoretical engagement with Hollywood enabled a critique of a patriarchal system, while still taking its cinema seriously. For me, Freudian psychoanalytic theory clearly offered a new vocabulary for thinking about Hollywood, a cinema that I loved but that I was now examining through new eyes and new ideas. There was, furthermore, definitely a new intellectual and aesthetic excitement to be gained from discovering the signs of

patriarchal society, which reinforced our fascination with the cinema and the fascination of deciphering it.

But aside from critique, feminist film theorists found rich material in the Hollywood melodrama. In this genre, specifically directed towards a female audience, domestic space and the dilemmas women faced as mothers could be explored. Here language as such went into a further crisis. The constraints and conventions of the genre took the aesthetic emphasis on the visual language of cinema even further. The melodrama, located as it was within the heart of the family with its conflicting emotions, repression and desires, touched on areas of social life that could not easily find verbal expression in day to day language. The language of the cinema thus became even more central for meanings that could not be articulated, taboo emotions lost under social convention and repression.

b. Feminism and avant-garde cinema.

Although Hollywood provided important source material for the development of a psychoanalytically and semiotically orientated feminist film theory, it was clear by the early 70s that the cinema loved by the cinephiles of the 60s was no longer current. During this same period, in the film culture more generally and with particular importance for feminism, a new awareness of alternative and avant-garde cinemas developed in Britain. A new political aesthetic motivated the idea of a counter cinema and new conditions of production made its realisation possible. There is a difference of origin and aesthetic engagement between the avant-garde that grew out of artists' practice and the concept of counter cinema that grew out of a residual dialogue with popular cinema. When Peter Wollen and I began to make Films in the mid-70s, the aesthetic that we were developing evolved in direct opposition to the conventions associated with Hollywood. We were still, however, thinking in terms of *mise-en-scene*, camera movement, lighting, colour, that is, those elements in the language of cinema that had moulded our thinking in the cinephilia days of the 1960s. Meanwhile, a new European experimental narrative cinema began to be seen in Britain that suggested new aesthetic possibilities. Alongside feminist film

theory, a new interest developed in both films made by women and in the possibility of a feminist avant-garde.

Certain conditions need to be in place for a political, cinematic avant-garde, feminist or otherwise, to come into existence as a movement. First of all, some kind of collective foundation has to provide an intellectual and aesthetic point of reference for discussion and circulation of ideas as well as an aesthetic aspiration or strategy. Secondly, an economically viable technology has to be available. Finally, some kind of financial support structure has to enable a reach beyond individual efforts into a more systematically sustained movement. During the 1970s, most of these conditions were fulfilled in Britain. There was a high level of political consciousness around the independent film sector, to which feminism made a key contribution both in terms of debate about representation and the early, tentative attempts to create a feminist cinema. 16mm film was sufficiently low cost, aesthetically satisfying and easily used by women either working collectively or as cinematographers. Changes in personnel at both the Arts Council of Great Britain and the British Film Institute in the early to mid-70s transformed policy in support of the new, politically conscious, avant-garde. And throughout this period, the Edinburgh Film Festival provided a crucial forum in which not only was new experimental cinema seen and discussed, but major retrospectives of Hollywood directors were held in conjunction with discussions of film theory organised by the journal *Screen*. For about ten years, the EFF brought together all the strands that made up the left film practice and film theory communities. Two major developments brought this period to an end. In 1979 the Thatcher government succeeded Labour and, very rapidly, sources of funding for this kind of 'unmarketable' work dried up. Secondly, in 1982, Channel 4 came on the air revolutionising the independent film sector with new funding but bringing with it a new kind professionalism that ultimately marginalized the political avant-garde. At the same time, the political atmosphere changed as the extreme right-wing policies of the new government altered political priorities.

I have tried to locate the development of film theory, and particularly feminist film theory, within a historical and cultural context: Britain in the 1970s. My interest now

is in the ways in which the radically different context of the present, the early years of the twenty-first century, might demand a shift in theoretical thinking about film which could respond, politically and aesthetically to these changes.

3. Looking at the past from the present.

To my mind, the beginning of the 1980s is a watershed in our history and in film culture. By and large this period saw the end of the feminist influenced avant-garde while feminist film theory began to move into academia and acquire a new status. During that decade, world events marked the point at which the traditions of progressive politics suffered from the changing balance between left and right. The success of neo-liberal economics, the collapse of communism, the globalization of capitalism, the export of industry to non-unionized developing economies, the impoverishment of Africa, an increase in racism both in Europe and other parts of the world definitively changed the political spectrum. These events carved a gap in the continuity of history that created a 'before' and 'after', a 'then' and a 'now'. During this period, not only was it difficult to maintain the progressive optimism of the 1970s, it was also hard to privilege the problems of women, especially those of West and the priorities of film feminism, while left politics failed in post-colonial and Third World countries. My interest in looking back across these catastrophes lies, not just in mourning the past, but in maintaining a critical engagement with the threads that might keep it alive. The watershed also coincided with the arrival of new visual media technologies that relegated cinema to the 'then' side of the divide.

The arrival of new technologies, in addition to changing conditions of production, has also brought new ways of viewing the cinema. These changes have inevitably affected spectatorship and thus, for me, theories of spectatorship. In the 1970s I wrote about the voyeuristic spectator, my original point of engagement with feminism and film theory. This concept depended, in the first instance, on certain material conditions of cinema exhibition: darkness, the projector beam lighting up the screen, the procession of images that imposed their own rhythm on the spectator's attention. And, of course, the

particular structure of spectacle that the Hollywood studios, above all, refined so perfectly through the eroticised, streamlined image of the female star. Now new technologies, the digital and the electronic, have transformed the ways in which films are consumed. Now the spectator can control the pace of a film, still the image, and repeat a certain sequence over and over while skipping others. Inevitably, these changes affect modes of spectatorship.

First of all, the question of curiosity returns in a new form. Early feminist film theory privileged a deciphering form of spectatorship, focused particularly on the image of woman as signifier and symptom to be decoded. The 'to-be looked-at-ness' associated with cinematic conditions that favoured voyeurism could mutate, under the impact of feminism, into seeing intellectually, analytically and with the mind's eye. This kind of spectatorship answered the demands of avant-garde cinema which, in its very essence, attempted to produce a self-conscious, aesthetically aware audience. But both these forms of engagement with the cinema, either the deciphering critic or the avant-garde spectator, were restricted to an elite. During the optimistic years of the 1970s, film theorists and filmmakers had believed that the wide and general dissemination of interest in these kinds of approaches to film would only be a matter of time. Of course, by the early 1980s, the loss of the necessary conditions for an avant-garde film movement brought any such aspiration to an abrupt end.

I would suggest that new technologies, and the new forms of spectatorship that they offer, have a particular relevance to the intellectual, political and aesthetic priorities of the moment. The dislocation associated with the crises of the 1980s brought with it a sense of a break in the continuities of history. The Women's Movement and its utopian aspirations seem to stand poised at the end of a long series of progressive movements that have stretched across the twentieth century. Rather than simply accept the end of that era, the present configuration demands a return to the past and a re-examination of ideas and images of history. In this context the beauty and the political significance of the cinema shift into their relation with time itself, its accessibility through the indexical qualities of celluloid. Film, bearing the imprint of its very moment of inscription, raises questions

about the representation of time as well as, in the cliché, offering an unprecedented means of time travel. The distinction between fiction and documentary begins to fade and the possibility of new kind of cinematic experience emerges. In this hybrid relation between the celluloid original and its new electronic carrier, there is time to reflect on time itself and on the presence of the past and on the then-ness of the photographic process. Stilling the forward movement of a film erodes the narrative time that usually imposes itself on the cinematic time, the sequence of moments at which the images are recorded. As narrative coherence fragments, the moment in which an object, figure or event is actually inscribed on the original material suddenly finds visibility in the slowed or stilled image. As a pause for reflection leads to reflection on time itself, on the presence of history preserved on film, a new concept of a curious spectator begins to emerge. The curious spectator, or, to use Raymond Bellour's terminology, the 'pensive' spectator, can confront the film's original moment of registration in the film stilled. This new technology allows a fresh and unfamiliar insight into the old and the pensive spectator can discover more in the celluloid image than could be seen at twenty-four frames per second. As movement gives way to immobility, the present tense of movement is interrupted by the sudden eruption of stillness and the past, and absence becomes presence. This aesthetic development relates to, and may even address, the way in which history itself has become difficult in the aftermath of the great 'gap' forged by the emergence of the right and globalization in the 1980s. The cinema, combining its long celluloid memory with its new digital capacity, offers a means for negotiating and forging connections across the divide. The cinema might be used as a means of looking back at history through the images it has recorded over the course of the twentieth century. The cinema may now be turned back on itself, into a means of looking backwards at history, at the cultures of modernity now rendered archaic.

I would like to give an example of the kind of 'pensive' spectatorship that I am trying to evoke. The opening sequence of Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (Universal 1959) takes place on the beach at Coney Island. It revolves around the encounter between Lora Meredith (Lana Turner), who in the story will become a successful actress and Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore), the black woman she befriends who becomes her maid.

Apparently, Annie is the only black figure among a mass of white extras that make up the carefully choreographed crowd. However, a closer scrutiny of the scene reveals that black extras both foreshadow and accompany her first appearance. The extras are not only on the screen so fleetingly that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to register their presence at twenty-four frames a second but they are also placed at the edge of frame. As the spectator's eye is concentrated on the action of the central characters in the centre of the frame, it is only when the film is halted and the frame can be scanned that these significant details become visible. They have a particular significance for the theme of race that is so central to the film. Halting the image, concentrating on the sudden appearance of the black figures on the screen, they take on added power and weightiness, standing in for and conjuring up the mass of 'coloured people' rendered invisible by racism and oppression, marginalized within culture and representation. From this perspective, they foreshadow the apartheid invisibility that surrounds Annie's social life that is unknown to Lora ('Miss Lora, you never asked'). This is the world that becomes visible, filling and overwhelming the screen during the film's final-spectacle, Annie's funeral. Here black people line the streets and walk as mourners in the funeral procession and black culture appears with the church service and Mahalia Jackson's singing. The fleeting image of the extras in the opening moments of the film refers to a social unconscious, the 'unspeakable' nature of race that haunts the film. But their presence outside the conscious perception of the spectator makes a gesture towards the unconscious of the story itself and Annie's place within it.

Feminist film theory and practice emerged at the end of the economic boom and social transformations that followed the World War II, bringing promise not only to its main beneficiaries, the industrialized countries, but also to those emerging from colonialism and neo-colonialism. Then it was politically important for feminist theory to question the relation between image and referent, to demonstrate that commodified images of women had their origins in psychic structures that bore no fixed relation to 'reality'. Now, aesthetic and intellectual priorities have shifted with the political shifts that brought the forces of neo—liberal imperialism back to prominence and the stories of their victims are increasingly lost within history. In this process, the familiar indexicality

of the celluloid image takes on a new value. At the same time, the relation between the celluloid image and the new digital, non-indexical, media modifies any stability and certainty suggested by the material presence of the index. In the last resort, the conjuncture between the two media opens up a space in which other temporalities may be found concealed within the irrevocable drive of linear narrative time. The cinema, refracted through the new technology, not only provides the raw material for re-forging links across the great divide of the eighties but also a metaphor for reflecting on the difficulty of understanding time and history. From this perspective, feminism's alternative histories, its reconfiguring of story-telling and its questioning given patterns of temporality provide an invaluable point of departure.

References:

1. Both 'English' and 'Establishment', are key terms for understanding cultural conflict in Britain. 'English' insists on a tradition of patriotism and particularity, specifically excluding the Celtic countries; 'the Establishment' is elegantly summarized by Francois Bedarida: 'Quite unlike a caste, the Establishment had no fixed rules for admission or disqualification. . . . Heredity, family connections, going to the same schools, belonging to the same clubs, the same social circle, going to the same parties, such were the conditions that enabled the 'charmed circle' to survive all change unscathed, whether economic, political, religious or cultural.
2. See, for instance, 'Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis: Interview with Raymond Bellour by Janet Bergstrom' in *Camera Obscura* 3-4, Berkeley 1979.