

FEMINEST NEW NARRATIVE

SHOCK TROOPS OR REAR GUARD?

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In 1986 one might easily conclude that political filmmaking is in disarray on a global scale. Mass popular culture, historically a site for opposition on both aesthetic and political grounds, is being embraced not only by the post-modernist art community, but by those who see themselves as artistic guerillas in a war whose weapons are images. Feminists especially face a serious dilemma, for feminist aesthetic theory of the past ten years has consistently reiterated the complicity with patriarchal ideology of the formal properties of mass culture, as well as of popular image. The wholesale abandonment of such insights is impossible. Yet production in the dominant mode--fictional narrative in the most "entertaining" genres such as the fantastic, the musical, detective, romance and melodrama--is burgeoning on an unprecedented scale amongst feminist filmmakers. Feminist film theory is also undergoing some renovation, as it comes to grips with feminist filmmaking practice.



This article will outline a brief history of the varieties of conjunction of filmmaking practice and political motivation, and of the aesthetic and political theories which informed these meetings. Designed to arrive in fairly short order at the present moment, specifically in relation to developments in feminist filmmaking, this account will emphasize in particular the tradition of opposition to mass culture and popular forms amongst political movements in cinema, and the relation of film genres to that opposition.

The earliest political attacks on the popular cinema came from the Russians. Futurism, Constructivism, and eccentricism are labels attached to fine differences, but what the poet Mayakovski called "the Army of Art" was united in its desire to build a new art, an aesthetic revolution which would mirror the aims of the social and economic revolution of 1917 (Schnitzer & Martin, 1973, p. 16). There are two points to be made here which illuminate our history of political aesthetics. The first is that fundamental to the new art was a critique of the old, the popular art founded in the psychological narrative of the nineteenth century novel and exemplified in the new methods of theatrical realism being developed by Stanislavsky in the Moscow Art Theatre. The second point is that both documentary and avant-garde formats were argued with equal conviction as the correct vehicles for this new political aesthetic.

Everyone knows the ending of this chapter in film history. Stalin didn't agree. In his view, the popular forms which emphasized discursive narrative, individual psychology, and domestic naturalism were most appropriate to the services of the state. "Social realism" was born, and the practitioners of a revolutionary art found themselves in exile or worse. This dramatic episode in cinema history would forever mark the conjunction of realist narrative with dominant ideology, whether in Hollywood or Mosfilm, and the assignment of a political agenda to the henceforth marginal forms of documentary and the avant-garde.

In fact, for the next fifty years, as the avant-garde increasingly removed itself from the realms of social life, becoming entrenched in abstraction or personal expression or the meta-discourse of art itself, a political cinema would be virtually confined to the documentary mode. Under the wideflung influence of John Grierson, the definition of the very word "documentary" was changed to include the expectation of a social point of view. When he worked with the General Post Office in the 1930s, the heroic, formative period of the British documentary, and when he came to Canada to found and guide the National Film Board, for Grierson documentary was political propaganda. Despite the shift in ideological motivation, neither the cinematic apparatus nor the aesthetic assumptions were significantly altered, however. Under WWII, 35mm film still dominated both theatrical and nontheatrical production, thereby distinctly affecting the formal properties of political documentary. Dramatic lighting and sets shot in studios were backdrops for directed action sequences, and the use of models, rain and wind from hoses and fans, re-enactments often by professional actors, and stock footage were normal even in newsreels. Post-production techniques favoured modern classical scores,

Eisensteinian rhythmic montage, and poetic voice-over commentaries or post-dubbed dialogue. In short, the techniques of the documentary were not too far removed from those of 35mm dramatic films. The "truth" of realism was not an issue for the Griersonian documentary.

Cinema vérité in 16mm, or direct cinema as it was also known, was the first new film genre in thirty years to develop a theory based in both politics and aesthetics, as well as in the cinematic apparatus itself. An understanding of the political significance of cinematic language was crucial to cinema vérité, which was based not only on a politics of truth and authenticity, but on a new approach to documentary material facilitated by the lightweight portable 16mm camera and crystal synch sound equipment. The implicit critique was of cinematic illusionism. The flawless and highly orchestrated soundtrack, the dramatic chiaroscuro of Hollywood lighting, the perfectly composed and smoothly executed framing and tracking, even the now too-familiar faces and voices of professional narrators, and the fluid, quick-cutting montage sequences had all been conventional aspects of documentary, but were now considered signs of "manipulation". Shaky hand-held camera, light spills, changes in exposure, swish pans, reframings and refocusing, background noise in the ambient sound, uncut shots that would continue at length to allow for full self-revelation without the aid of pointed montage--all of these qualities, once considered signs of amateurism, became the cinematic signifiers of truth. Where once an urgently committed point of view had been considered appropriate to political filmmaking, now a rigorous lack of involvement, an ambiguous jumbling of contradictions, a refusal of narrative explanations or comments, and the insistence on the eloquence and truth of intimate observation characterized political filmmaking. Above all, it was the new focus on people talking which produced the most revolutionary impact.

Throughout the sixties, cinema vérité proliferated in the hands of a leftist and increasingly feminist counterculture. Their subjects were striking workers, civil rights activists, Viet-Nam protestors, presidential candidates, rock stars, children, men and women in the street. The constant social message: the ravages of social institutions on the well-being of the individual. The cinematic message was again the critique of fiction and illusionism, for these were the people that Hollywood had ignored, forgotten, or distorted for fictional purposes.

By the late sixties, feminists had also turned their attention to the distorted stereotypes of women found in most mass media and in Hollywood and TV films in particular. The definition of feminist filmmaking quickly became the replacement of such false and negative images with "positive" images of "real" women, primarily through documentary films.

The theory which informed such feminist criticism and practice later became known as the "images of women" approach. A sociologically based theory, images of women criticism grew out of the political theories and strategies of the North American



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women's movement dominated by Radical Feminism. The central strategy of Radical Feminism was the technique of consciousness-raising, which asserted that the world could be changed by increasing the awareness and understanding of the oppression of women, and by changing attitudes towards virtually all aspects of life in a patriarchal world. Although Radical Feminism rejected the abuses of women perpetrated by the psychiatric profession and the popular applications of Freudianism, consciousness-raising ironically had its roots in assumptions similar to Freud's. Both "talking cures", they assume that change will come about through bringing the unknown to the level of consciousness, and that the most deeply formative socializing forces come from our relations with the world around us. Whereas Freud had emphasized the structural relations between family members as the crucial factors in the formation of the unconscious, Radical Feminism emphasized institutional forces such as schools, mass media, and the culture at large. The images of women found in advertising, television, primary school textbooks, and Hollywood movies were significant targets in the battle to reclaim women's bodies, faces, and psyches. The feminist documentary was the principle weapon of struggle.

The approach to political filmmaking was no less sophisticated from women than from the institution of cinema itself, which accepted cinema vérité on its own terms, as an alternative to the illusionist distortions of popular genres. Generally, cinema vérité was seen as transparent; its formal properties were accepted not as signifiers of a constructed reality, different from fiction films in form but not in degree of "mediation", but as unmediated reality itself. The documentary mode was fully accepted not as a tool with which to construct a new reality, but as a transparent window through which to see the "real" reality that was already there, simply falsified by Hollywood and commercial television.

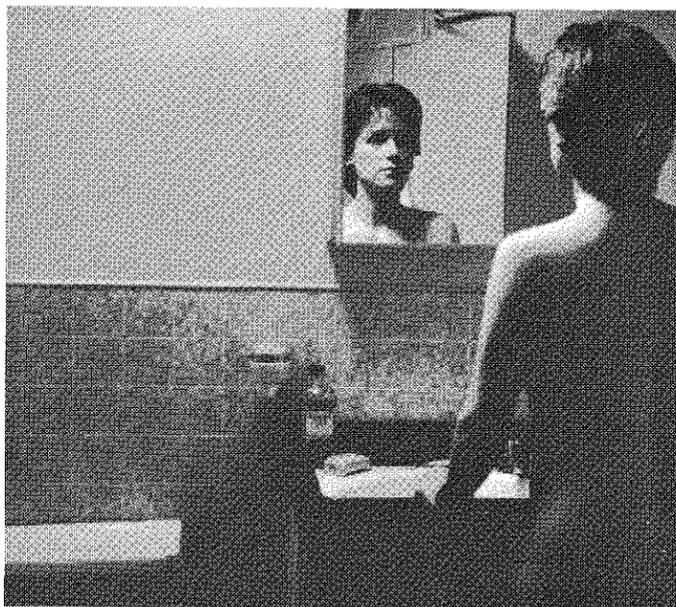
In the early 1970s, however, a new breeze began to blow through feminist thought, a breeze that wafted across the Atlantic predominantly from Britain. As Claire Johnston said in 1974, "You can have films that on a content level appear quite progressive but that at the same time, at the level of cinema, the level of the way the sign is used, are still extremely fetishistically involved with women. This is particularly true of the modern cinema where there seems to be a direct attempt by a number of liberal filmmakers, and even women, to project a free woman (Kay & Peary, 1977, pp. 405-6). With statements such as this, a new theory and practice were instituted. The critique of the operations of cinematic illusionism returned once again to the Russians and to Brecht for inspiration and instruction, as well as to Barthes, Lacan, and Althusser. For many feminists, the documentary mode was seen to be inadequate as the site of struggle, which must involve crucial work on the signifier as well as the signified.

The critique of realism as the bourgeois convention which worked to efface the ideological functioning of textual meaning production was enhanced subsequently by a critique of narrative per se. "Sadism demands a story", wrote Laura Mulvey, "depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end (Mulvey, 1975, p. 14). Mulvey's seminal essay provoked almost a decade of theory which developed the connection between the workings of narrative, the phallus, the fetishized body of woman as the object of desire, and the relation of the play of looks within and across the film text with the constitution of the spectator/subject.

As for a feminist filmmaking practice, it was clearly no longer sufficient to tell a new story, a story of "real" women in film--women who face problems, live and think out solutions, rather than women who only cause crises, bewitch and wane", as one early feminist guide put it (Betancourt,

1974, p. 136). Whether in the documentary or fictional mode, all stories were eventually the same. Teresa de Lauretis put the argument against narrative:

In its 'making sense' of the world, narrative endlessly reconstructs it as a two-character drama in which the human person creates and recreates *himself* out of an abstract or purely symbolic other--the womb, the earth, the grave, the woman....The drama has the movement of passage, a crossing, an actively experienced transformation of the human being into--man (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 121).



Feminist filmmaking was thus recommended as an oppositional practice, a cinematic interrogation of narrative and the dominant conventions of cinematic illusionism. The chief vehicle for a political filmmaking practice was to be no longer documentary but an oppositional avant-garde. The feminist avant-garde catalyzed a great deal of work centering on issues of representation, the filmic text, the relation of the spectator to the text, and the play of language within the text.

The formal strategies of the structural avant-garde, which had dominated the preceding period, had effected a materialist examination of cinema. The material operations of the cinematic apparatus itself, the effects of grain, light, lenses, filters, projection, the emulsion and even the sprocketholds themselves had occupied filmmakers for what came to seem like an inordinate period of time. But now, what had formerly appeared to be a modernist fascination with the object itself was incorporated into a political project which used these examinations of the apparatus to emphasize the relation of the spectator to a constructed, ideologically complicit practice of representation. For a decade from the mid-seventies, in feminist filmmaking, the avant-garde once again asserted its former position as a mode of political discourse in cinema.

In the same period, feminists did continue to produce documentary films, but the 'innocence' of cinema vérité was no longer possible, at least for theoretically informed critics and practitioners. The "formal" documentary which analyzed or foregrounded its own discursive practices or the entirely constructed film which performed its own discursive practices or the entirely constructed film which performed fictional upon documentary conventions got some attention, but critical interest was focussed on the "feminist theory film" which dominated the festivals and cinema studies classrooms. Meanwhile, interestingly enough, the grass roots women's movement increasingly turned its attention back to the beloved documentaries of the early and mid-seventies, and embraced with too-quick delight the odd Hollywood film that presented "positive" women characters (eg. *Norma Rae*, *An Unmarried Woman*, *Julia*) or the few European art films that seemed to present a "female sensibility" (eg. *Entre Nous*, *Marianne and Julianne*, *A Question of Silence*).



By 1983, at least one feminist assessor was arguing the exhaustion of the feminist "theory films", and criticizing the feminist documentary was still stuck in the uncritical use of realism, while theory itself she saw as immersed in a ping-pong game of simple opposition and binarism. E. Ann Kaplan called for a move "beyond deconstruction to reconstruction" to learn how "to manipulate the recognized, dominating discourses so as to begin to free ourselves *through* rather than beyond them" (Kaplan, 1983, pp. 140-141). She calls, in other words, for the return to narrative, and moreover, to narrative at its most hysterical--melodrama--with the subject motherhood which, she argues, remains at least in part unviolated by the patriarchy, unenmeshed in the symbolic (Kaplan, 1983, pp. 205-6).

Laura Mulvey has also called for an end to binary oppositions (Mulvey, 1983), but from a somewhat more intricate theoretical base. The debate around narrative has focused on strategic formal points, such as the operations of suture, the positioning of the subject through the play of looks in the working of recognition/identification, and particularly on the eradication of sexual difference in the impetus towards closure. It is the beginnings and endings, she suggests, which return to the insistent interpellation of viewers into familiar subject-positions, maintaining thereby the existing cultural order. Mulvey hopes that we may employ the idioms and conventions of mass culture, specifically narrative forms, but that we may find our potential for subversion in the opening out of the narrative, the resistance to closure through and expansion of the "middle"--eg. through cyclical forms or celebrations of the ludic or carnival, an ecstatic dilation of elements of the spectacle (Mulvey, 1984).

Teresa de Lauretis is much less cautious, arguing that "the most exciting work in cinema and in feminism today is anti-narrative or anti-Oedipal; quite the opposite. It is narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance, for it seeks to stress the duplicity of that scenario and the specific contradiction of the female subject in it, the contradiction by which historical women must work with and against Oedipus" (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 157). As for feminist theory, she argues, it is time for some change: "Which is not to say that we should dispense with rigorous analysis and experimentation of 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 women's cinema has been engaged in the transformation of vision" (de Lauretis, 1985, p.158). Some writers see the return to narrative as simply a sellout, or more viciously, the willed destruction of the avant-garde. Some see the current trends as embedded in the endemic weaknesses of the theoretical project, which was always attendant first and foremost to the working of classical narrative and Hollywood and never "really" committed to the avant-garde (Elder, 1983).

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strategies. Argentinians tell the history of a decade of military rule by terror in slapstick (*Funny Dirty Little War*, 1983), while Cubans, in a break from social realism, discuss the housing shortage and escalating materialism through the conventions of situation comedy (*House for Swap*, 1984), Chantal Ackerman's shopping mall musical has recently been released. Even Jean-Luc Godard has returned to a pre-1968 narrative with *Je Vous Salue, Marie*, (1984).

Certainly, however, the trend towards narrative is firmly underway, not only among women filmmakers but throughout the international political cinema. In a return to the very territory which political filmmakers had fled only a generation ago, we find the widespread embrace not only of narrative but of the most "entertaining" conventions of the narrative mode. Post-modernist sensibilities in the visual arts and architecture have paved the way for the re-institution of romantic and classical allusions, as well as the iconography of mass culture, narrativity, and even sentimental kitsch. Avant-garde cinema has been one of the last bastions of modernism, but even its most stalwart practitioners are flinging themselves -- sometimes playfully, but sometimes oh-so-seriously -- into genres such as the musical, melodrama, thriller and fantastic. South American and Third World cinemas, once noted for their indigenous qualities, are now sweetening their politics with strong infusion of Hollywood

The return to narrative can most productively be read not only as a "sell-out", or even as a gesture in opposition to the self-reinforcing elitism of an ever-more esoteric avant-garde. The desire for larger audiences, obviously one crucial factor, may truly be directed towards harnessing the pleasure of mass culture to a trenchant and subversive politics. In this way, the current trends seem truer to the revolutionary aesthetics of Eisenstein and Brecht, whose artistic sources included the working class arts of their day (circus, music hall, sports arena). Claire Johnston, one of the most influential people in the early stages of a developing feminist theory, certainly posited, in her repudiation of the cinema vérité documentary, a conjunction of "entertainment and politics" as an idea from Brecht whose time had come (Kay and Peary, 1974, p. 398).

De Lauretis characterizes the shift to narrative amongst women filmmakers rather differently: it is "a shift...from modernist or avant-garde aesthetic of subversion to an emerging set of questions about filmic representation...a shift in women's cinema from an aesthetic centred 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... What is new here is the particular conception of the audience, which now is envisaged in its heterogeneity and otherness from the text" (de Lauretis, 1985, pp. 169-70). Issues related to the spectator as social subject engendered as female have been explored in women's cinema in several ways, among them avant-garde strategies of the disjunction of image and voice, the reworking of narrative space, and modes of address which interrogate conventions of representation. De Lauretis concludes that both from an oppositional avant-garde and within narrative "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', of by that one alludes to the traditional, classical and modernist canons of aesthetic representation" (de Lauretis, 1985, p. 175).

I began by suggesting that political filmmaking was in disarray on a global scale, and that this is a particularly perilous time for feminist filmmakers. In the course of writing this paper, I have come through to a view of the current trend towards narrative as quite other than the wholesale abandonment of the insights of feminist film

theory, and a sense that indeed we may be in a period of intense activation of both theory and practice. As the practical demands of the women's movement are inexorably achieving results in the form of increasing participation of women in the mainstream of cultural industries, where feminism itself is increasingly taken for granted, we may be not in disarray or impasse, but simply in the process of discovering the most productive deployment of theoretical and material resources. It may be more accurate to posit retrenchment, rather than co-optation or retreat, as the current position of feminist troops.

Let us continue to proceed warily, however, for there are no signs of retreat for the forces which seek to maintain male dominance, and these fields of the dominant discourse are intricately mined. But if we wish to end two decades of sniping from the marginal positions of the documentary and the avant-garde, we have no choice but to amass our forces and storm the fortress of the dominant mode.

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