

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 Envied 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?

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As well, BC Film has put \$245,000 in short-form production including several episodes of CBC half-hour dramas, \$45,000 in pre-production and \$25,550 for internship training (all six recipients are learning to be producers, a positive sign in a region ripe with story ideas but short on overall management talent).

Not that BC Film is ignoring writers: about 30 individuals have received script development money in amounts ranging from \$3,000 to the maximum \$10,000.

Sterloff is particularly pleased with the astronomical increase in federal Telefilm investment made possible by having matching provincial funds in place. He estimates it at between 500-600 per cent (total value: \$12.7 million) but points out that the West Coast is still getting short changed by the Broadcast Fund. He says his new Capitalization Fund, which will invest in B.C. development companies rather than individual projects, will make it easier to compete with Toronto-based outfits.

He also points out that the private sector is outspending even his own agency (\$5.7 million versus \$4.5) and decries the low level of National Film Board activity (\$467,000). The CBC spent \$1.3 million while other broadcasters invested \$3.5.

Although BC Film has now used up its initial feature budget, Sterloff reports that the provincial government is kicking in an additional million dollars so that the agency can forward funds to producers who were left hanging when Telefilm spent its allotment earlier than scheduled. Sandy Wilson's *California Dreaming* is expected to take advantage of the offer.

Canada Film Year: 1989-1990

TORONTO — The Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television has announced that Canada Film Year will begin in the early fall of 1989 and continue until the end of the summer of 1990.

With a board of directors of 25 industry members from across the country, chaired by producer Stephen Roth, Canada Film Year Inc. is a charitable nonprofit organization, whose objective is to increase Canadian audiences' awareness and appreciation of Canadian films. Co-chairpersons of this long-awaited salute to Canadian filmmaking are Gordon Pinsent and Monique Mercure.

The celebrations are to honour, in 1989, the 10th anniversary of the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television, the 25th anniversary of the Cinematheque québécoise and the 50th anniversary of the National Film Board. Peter

Mortimer, executive vice-president of the ACFTP, is chairman of the Program Committee, responsible for reviewing applications and for approving funding for participation in Canada Film Year.

The Academy will administer Canada Film Year, which in turn will develop the national programs. Managing director is Marie-Christine Dufour, former press secretary to Flora MacDonald, and on temporary loan from the ministry of communications.

The estimated budget is \$4 million. Telefilm Canada will contribute \$2.5 million from investment revenues over three fiscal years and the rest will be raised through corporate financing, merchandising and special fundraising.

MONTREAL — Canada has signed a co-production agreement with Argentina.

The official signing between governments in Montreal follows a joint industry-government exploratory mission to Buenos Aires in early September. The agreement facilitates the pooling of financial resources and creative talent of the countries involved.

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