Room for a view

BY CATHERINE RUSSELL

In 1973, Claire Johnston declared that the strategies and goals of women's cinema were those of a counter-cinema. And indeed, a good number of women filmmakers have countered dominant cultural representations of women by dismantling the codes and conventions of mainstream film. Claiming that the gaze in classical film is inevitably defined as male, a central task of this counter-cinema has been to reorganize that gendered "economy" of looking and to seek out new visual and acoustic spaces for women in cinematic representation.

But this is 1989. Surely things have changed in 16 years. Well, some things have and some things haven't. In the new commercial cinema, the boys are still up on their old tricks behind the camera (e.g., The Last Temptation of Christ), but the feminist opposition appears to have reentered. In light of recent films like Rainer, Alkman, Pool and Borden, feminist filmmaking can no longer be so easily identified as "counter-cinema." The Man Who Enrolled Women, The Golden Eighties, La Femme de l'Hôtel and Working Girls are all big (relatively expensive) films, running over 90 minutes. Where the original conception of "counter-cinema" was non-narrative, narrative being the taboo project of patriarchy, women are now dismantling narrative space from within. In doing so, they have been able to reach out to slightly larger audiences, to climb out of the "ghetto" of experimental film.

Why is "Experimental" in the title of this column, in brackets? Is alternative film practice, like feminist film practice, redefining its status as "marginal"? Marginality, after all, assumes a coherent centre. Feminist film theory is currently backing off from the critique of patriarchy, with which it was preoccupied for so many years, and encouraging the histories of women in film—from the alternative practices of Dulac, Deren and Duras, to the mainstream genres of melodramatic women's films and soap operas, and the star personas of Davis, Monroe and Crawford. In this archetypical process, the representation of women is restated in the affirmative and the marginal gives way to what theorists Deleuze and Guattari call (with reference to Kafka) "the minor." A minor cinema likewise flourishes in Canada and elsewhere. It is always in danger, however, of slipping into its own marginal hegemony, threatened by the ever-present temptation of enacting new definitions of unity and coherence. The problem of categories and definitions does not only belong to filmmakers but, most critically, to curators, distributors, programmers and juries.

Some feminists have recently begun to redress the hegemony of their own practice,十几年 ago, and to consider the possibility of a multiplicity of feminisms. Taking into account the variables of class and ethnic difference, sexual difference can no longer remain a singular definition of oppression, and white bourgeois women cannot speak for all women, but have to do some listening to other "minor" voices.

One of these voices, a particularly strong one, is that of Trinh T. Minh-ha, a Vietnamese-American woman whose films of Apeople, Nested Spaces: Living a Round (1985) and Rassamkoum (1989) are neither ethnographic, nor documentary, nor experimental or feminist, but all of these. The practice of filmmaking as an act of looking remains at the center of her films, in which the gaze in classical film is inevitably defined as male, a central task of this counter-cinema has been to reorganize that gendered "economy" of looking and to seek out new visual and acoustic spaces for women in cinematic representation.

The centrality of psychoanalysis in feminist theory has brought with it not only phallocentrism, but a particular burden of anxiety. If one compares Patricia Grubbs's Stained Evidence (1982) with Jackie Burroughs' A Winter Zen (1987), can one not detect a lifting of this burden? Both films are about North American women traveling through the exotic machismo of Mexico, and each film in its own way managed to escape from the Hollywood film machine, Boz, and Bruce Reassemblage from Famous Players addressing theatrical distribution of short films. John Karmazyn from Filmclips explaining his business which distributes, the work of independent filmmakers internationally to festivals, Jan Reesekamp, of Films Transit, describing his job as distributor of Canadian independent works to European television, Francois Poitras from La Boîte Noire, a video rental business that deals with independent film distribution by videocassette, and Judith Deube, who traced Cinema Libre's history (a Quebec production and promotion center) from 1978 to present showing how shifts in grant policies affected producers, distributors and filmmakers.