

The Projector

Film and Media Journal

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Women and American Independent Film



Lizzie Borden
Directing *Born in Flames*



Rebecca Miller
Directing *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*

Student Editor: Alex Bean

Founding Editor: Cynthia Baron

Articles by: Carolyn J. Sweet, Stephen Harrick, Nina Orechwa, Rosalind Sibielski

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Editor's Introduction



H.D. (Hilda Doolittle)
Poet, Filmmaker, Film Theorist

From the Founding Editor:

The fall 2008 issue of *The Projector* reflects our new/current editorial policies, for while the journal began as a venue for solicited undergraduate writing, over time it has become a referred publication on film, media, and culture with submissions of critical and creative work from emerging and established scholars and practitioners.

On this occasion of formalizing the transition to a peer review model, it seems worth noting that, despite the expanded scope and presence of digital media and cinema scholarship's increased emphasis on considering films in light of larger cultural practices, "the projector," the title chosen by film major and now critic James Eldred, could be as salient today as when the first issue of the journal appeared on the website of the BGSU Department of Theatre and Film in 2001.

While the term suggests different connotations at different times, the "Projector" poems by H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) published in the 1920s in the British journal *Close Up* might be called upon to highlight certain underlying continuities; for as Susan McCabe points out, H.D.'s poems suggest that it's the projection of moving images that makes it possible for bodies to reassert their ghostly presence and for audiences to "inhabit a hybrid consciousness – hypnotized and yet awake."

Thus, along with celluloid's much-discussed disappearance, and transitions from film projection to video projection, from front screen to rear screen projection, and from psychoanalytic to cultural models for analyses of human "projection," cinematic tropes are bound into digital media (from the various "film stock" filters in video cameras to the principle of montage that structures hyperlinks) and, as the four articles in this issue demonstrate, reception studies and industry studies of film still reckon with responses to screen images.

Taking up questions of representation and political economy, the articles on Women and American Independent Film in this issue of *The Projector* offer productive insights into the business practices and cultural conventions surrounding and shaping films and their reception. As I read them, the essays suggest that while films might make it possible for audiences to "inhabit a hybrid consciousness – hypnotized and yet awake," discursive and material practices in film are often informed by the decisions of people who are awake yet hypnotized by dominant socio-economic structures.

For more than a fragment of information about H.D.'s reflections on projected images, see: *H. D.: Collected Poems 1912-1944* (ed. Louis L. Martz, 1983); *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism* (eds. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, Laura Marcus, 1998); *Embodying Beauty* (Malin Pereira, 2000); *H.D. and the Image* (Rachel Conner, 2004); and *Cinematic Modernism* (Susan McCabe, 2005).

Cynthia Baron

Editor's Introduction: Women and American Independent Film

In her article “Conceptions of Cool in American Society,” Carolyn Sweet finds what might appear to be an unexpected reason for the lack of women’s participation in the American film industry. Locating statistics about women’s positions in the industry, Sweet explains that women held only 15% of the creative positions on the top 250 domestic grossing films of 2006. From there, her analysis of this situation is startlingly simple: women aren’t cool, or at least are not perceived as cool. Sweet’s article highlights the reality that an industry that has long catered to a young male audience has made its audiences’ perceptions its own. She proposes that unless cultural perceptions change, this hardwired connection will silence countless women artists.

Issues of identity marketing arise in Stephen Harrick’s article, “Something more ‘universal:’” Women, Marketing, and Independent Films.” Looking at Christina Lane’s essay, “Just Another Girl Outside the Neo-Indie,” Harrick assesses her observations about the travails faced by women directors in American independent film. He questions Lane’s analysis of the marketing campaign for *The 24-Hour Woman*, an independent film about a Latina woman struggling to balance her personal and professional lives. While Lane argues that *The 24-Hour Woman* was unsuccessful because it was marketed to a general indie audience, with little attention given to enlisting the support of Hispanic groups and leaders, Harrick suggests that a marketing approach focused on questions of ethnicity can also lead to women’s films being denied the opportunity to reach a wider, crossover audience.

While analyzing an entirely different case study, crossover appeal is what Nina Orehwa writes about in her article, “Two Timing Cinema: The Hybridization of Independent and Mainstream Filmmaking Trends in *The Piano*.” In 1993 Jane Campion’s independent film won several Oscars and became a critical and box office success. Orehwa notes that this development is odd considering the film’s content: a trip across the world by a voluntarily mute woman and her young daughter, an arranged marriage that features no love, an initially coerced adulterous affair between the woman and one of her husband’s compatriots, and a depiction of characters’ sexuality as often being colored by their misogyny. As Orehwa points out, these factors place the film well outside the range of narratives found even in indie film, and so she examines the reasons for *The Piano*’s indie and mainstream success. Her analysis underscores the significant role that critical reception plays in the perceived appeal of many independent films.

Indies are generally reliant on strong reviews to be successful in a crowded marketplace. The reading and reception that critics pass on to their readers colors the general audience’s subsequent reaction to the film. Highlighting the fact that the critical establishment promoted *The Piano* as a “tidal wave of sensuality,” Orehwa notes that while she and other film scholars might not see the film that way, critics’ emphasis on sexuality led to box office success. Orehwa concludes that the intense relationship between critical reception and independent films can not only overwhelm perceptions of a film, it can also blur distinctions between independent and mainstream films.

The final piece in this issue is an in-depth essay on representation in cinema by Rosalind Sibielski entitled “*Avoiding the Male Gaze: The Search for Alternate Ways of ‘Viewing’ Sexual Difference in U.S. Independent Cinema and U.S. Popular Culture.*” Assessing the profound influence of Laura Mulvey’s landmark essay “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*,” Sibielski looks at how the idea of a male gaze has permeated scholarship and practice – with observers continually finding it in films and filmmakers attempting to establish some alternative. Contributing an important insight, Sibielski points out that by labeling of the gaze as “male” rather than “patriarchal,” she focused attention on “questions of gender rather than questions of ideological orientation.”

Sibielski explains that attempts to find or create a female gaze have led scholars and filmmakers to address problems of the gaze in superficial or counter-productive ways. Unfortunately, alternative deployments of the gaze that involve “women looking . . . at men or at each other” end up serving the same ideological purpose as the male gaze. Efforts to re-appropriate the male gaze, or to turn the gaze back on itself, have become entangled in the same ideology as conventional uses of the gaze, giving sanction to the politics of sexual difference and dominance that it implies. As Sibielski makes clear, simply changing the gender of the gaze does nothing to erase the values bound into the gaze as a representational strategy that reinforces patriarchal values of sexual difference and power.

Sibielski proposes that true opposition to the male gaze is not “female” but “feminist.” She cites two independent films, Rebecca Miller’s *Personal Velocity* and Lizzie Borden’s *Working Girl* as being particularly good examples of films that feature a feminist critique and deconstruction of the way the gaze figures into patriarchal representations. She explains that cinematic and narrative choices in *Personal Velocity* “comment on the eroticization of women within patriarchal culture, as well as the duel fascination and dread that surrounds women’s visual coding as object of the gaze.” She observes that Miller’s film “suggests that when it comes to the search for oppositional representations, it is not a re-gendering of the gaze, but rather a reconceptionalization of the act of looking.” Sibielski’s nuanced analysis of textual strategies in *Working Girls*, a film set in a high-class brothel, also demonstrates how the film de-eroticizes images of women and the sex work of its female characters. Her discussion shows how the film underlines the economic aspect of prostitution, the danger and monotony women face, and how Borden’s ostensibly mainstream use of framing and editing erase any glimmer of romanticism from prostitution, instead prompting viewers to see the profession and especially the women’s clientele in a critical light.

Taken together, the articles in this issue of *The Projector* invite us to rethink assumptions about women’s role in American independent film – on screen and off. The essays also suggest the need to: reassess choices about cinematic and narrative strategies in a film movement that ostensibly prides itself on its distinction from the norm; question (corporate) decisions about the marketing and distribution of “independent” films; and look more closely at the conventional terms critics use to discuss even independent films.

As the essays make evident, independent cinema can often fail to make a break with cultural norms because of the patriarchal patterns underlying production and reception. In closing, one might note that the design and critical/box office record of

Stephen Soderbergh *sex, lies, and videotape* is a case in point. The film, which focused on a young man with a predilection for recording intimate conversations with women about their sexual lives, not only caught fire with critics, winning the Palme d'Orr at Cannes, it also managed a box office gross of twenty five times the film's shooting cost. It may be that the film's central image of women baring themselves physically and emotionally for the man behind the camera is a succinct summation of the abiding gender politics in American (independent) film and culture.

Alex Bean

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Conceptions of Cool in American Society

by Carolyn Jambard-Sweet

Carolyn Sweet received a Bachelors of Art with a specialization in Art History from The Ohio State University in 2004, a Masters of Art with a specialization in Art History from Bowling Green State University in 2006 and is currently working towards a doctorate in American Culture Studies at BGSU. She has taught in the Humanities department at Washtenaw Community College in Ann Arbor Michigan since 2006.

Christina Lane's essay, *Just Another Girl Outside the Neo-Indie*, addresses the difficulties women directors face in the male dominated film industry. Lane elucidates the discriminatory production-distribution methods that stem from the "shortsighted process of catering to young, white, male audiences." According to a study conducted by Martha Lauzen, Lane's claims are not exaggerated; "In 2006, women comprised 15% of all directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers, and editors working on the top 250 domestic grossing films." The "Unchain the Women Directors" billboard created by the neo-feminist group the Guerilla Girls in association with Movies by Women cleverly announces Lauzen's sad statistics in the heart of Hollywood. The Peter Pan syndrome sells and movie executives know it. So is it really any wonder that the film industry fails to commission women to make movies for men? The lack of faith that the film industry imparts on women directors raises the question of whether or not chicks are cool enough to make movies that guys will dig, or more importantly if women even have the ability to be cool.

While discussing the concept of cool over the last few weeks I have heard it several times from men, not just any men, but intelligent, educated, likable, men; "girls aren't cool." That problematic declaration has plagued my thoughts for quite awhile now and I have come to the conclusion that it is in fact true. Deeply ingrained societal ideals do indeed deny women the capacity to be cool. In his book *The Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank cites Norman Mailer's mythic criteria for cool as the quest for pleasure and "the ability to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey with the rebellious imperatives of the self." The constructed identity adhered to women restricts them from meeting the demands of this legendary conception of cool. Women are not encouraged to be adventurous or rebellious loners. While a man

who chooses to live an independent lifestyle is referred to as a bachelor a woman who does the same is considered a spinster or an old maid.

The very essence of coolness contradicts the essence of womanhood; women are conceived as maternal, family orientated, desirous of love and companionship, and vulnerable when facing the world alone. The closest thing American culture has to a female Indiana Jones is Lara Croft and her sexualized existence can only be attributed to the market for animated stimulation created by gamers. Women, especially women who are wives or mothers cannot divorce themselves from society and exist without roots, the notion that somebody's wife or mother has the potential to imagine or create the next great horror, adventure, or science fiction blockbuster is inconceivable to most young men. Thus women are banned from the realm of cool and denied access to the role of the maverick director.

The inability to conceive of women as cool may be a contributing factor to the "one hit wonder" theory explored by Lane. It is far more difficult for women to encapsulate an auteur repertoire and a cult following than it is for the ultra cool male director. The conception of women as un-cool also influences the types of films that women directors have access to. "Women comprised 28% of individuals working on documentaries, followed by 25% on romantic comedies, 23% on comedy/dramas, 19% of romantic dramas, 16% on animated features, 14% on dramas, 12% on comedies and action adventure features, 10% on science fiction, and 5% on horror features." The small percentages of women successfully working in film are further limited to certain genres, primarily documentaries and romantic comedies and dramas.

Women flourish in the romantic comedy and romantic drama genres because it is socially acceptable for a woman to know romance, whereas men who are romantic are

often perceived as feminine. The accessibility for women in the realm of documentaries is no less surprising, especially considering the wide variety of women's issues that are explored in such films. However it is the boys club that possesses the animated features, action adventures, science fiction, and horror genres. Clearly women are not cool enough to delve into those male orientated waters, or are they? Mary Harron's *American Psycho* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* demonstrate that women can be wildly successful working in these genres if given the opportunity.

The lack of potential opportunities that plague the film industry are rampant throughout various facets of American life and perhaps the misconception of women as un-cool is partly to blame. Issues of discrimination and inequality brought to the forefront in the 1970's by the feminist movement have dissipated little over the years. Because women are conceived as unable to obtain coolness they are given little faith, especially within creative industries. Christina Lane's concerns for the future of women filmmakers are relevant and warranted. If the conceptions of cool in American society cannot be modified to encompass females, there is little hope for the success of women directors to escape the realms of chick flicks and socially responsible documentaries.

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Two Timing Cinema: The Hybridization of Independent and Mainstream Filmmaking Trends in *The Piano*

by Nina Orechwa

Nina Orechwa is a film addict from the Chicago area. She graduated from the University of Iowa with a degree in English before moving to Bowling Green where she currently teaches literature and studies philosophy.

In Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (1993), Ada (Holly Hunter), a young widow (and self-proclaimed mute) takes her daughter Flora (Anna Paquin) from their native Scotland to New Zealand during the mid-nineteenth century to marry Alisdair Stewart (Sam Neil), a man to whom her father has promised her hand. While no romance of any sort develops between Ada and her new husband, she engages in a sexual relationship with Alisdair's overseer, Baines (Harvey Keitel) who, after purchasing Ada's piano from her husband without her consent, orders her to provide him with eighty-eight X-rated piano lessons in exchange for the return of each of her piano's keys. What begins as sexual coercion morphs into an erotic game of cat and mouse between the unlikely pair—a game with dire consequences, including the forced amputation of one of Ada's index fingers. Ada's lack of an audible voice, her piano, her sexuality and her strength are the ingredients in this complicated tale to which gender ideology is tightly woven, and the uncomfortable truth of Ada's story lies in the fact that while Ada and Baines are indeed *romantic* with one another in the film, and that their relationship *is*, after a time, quite erotic, the question of *why* the two are either romantically *or* erotically linked isn't easily answered. In the absence of any real evidence of genuine romantic love between Ada and Baines, one is left with only an unsettling sense of the misogyny inherent in their relationship as well as a deeply disturbing connection between violence, possession and pleasure.

The film is undoubtedly sadistic in many respects, but its accessible story and inclusion of famous actors depicting characters many viewers can mostly identify with could easily cause one to label the independent film as one considerably more *mainstream* than what the independent film industry is typically used to. Upon closer inspection, however, the unsettling darkness of film's mise-en-scène and its disturbing

thematic motif of silence render the film one that is decidedly more *alternative* than much of what can be found in mainstream normative cinema. Indeed, a thoughtful analysis of the relationship between the often insincere portraits film reviews paint for potential audiences and how such portraits possibly alter an audience's ultimate reception of the film is hallmark to understanding the nuts and bolts of advertising in independent cinema culture, and offers a probable explanation as to why certain films seem to teeter on the fine line between independent and normative cinema. In addition, careful deconstructions of some of the central metaphors in a film like *The Piano* can reveal exactly which elements might categorize it as *independent*, and in turn, also help to explore thematic details of the film that might veer it closer to a definition of mainstream cinema. There is a compelling defense for the value of hybridizing these two types of films, particularly for filmmakers who seek to spread a strong political message to as wide an audience as possible.

In *Cinema & Culture: Independent Film in the United States, 1980-2001*, film scholar Deidre Pribram discusses the dichotomy of how independent films are often misrepresented due largely to macabre content not easily digested by the masses. In addition, Pribram takes American feminist bell hooks to task for dismissing *The Piano* as sexist and misogynistic. hooks argues that “young, African-American men are blamed as individuals for sexist, misogynistic, and violent lyrics although no attempt is made to identify and critique the cultural context in which gangsta rap exists” (Pribram 141-142). hooks’s argument centers around the hypocrisy of high society’s aversion to gangsta rap while simultaneously celebrating a film like *The Piano* (which is, in hooks’s estimation, at least *equally* misogynistic), as the epitome of “high art.” While Pribram acknowledges the validity of hooks’s view, she doesn’t agree that *The Piano* need necessarily be

categorized as a frankly misogynist text: “while wholeheartedly agreeing with hooks’s assessment of the widespread omission of social, political, economic, and psychic aspects in the analyses of cultural products dealing with gender, race, and many other issues, I would argue that her example of *The Piano* is a poor choice precisely because it is one of the rare filmic instances in which female sexuality and identity are expressed in cultural and ideological terms” (142). Subsequently, Pribram even accuses hooks of merely reading the reviews of the film rather than further engaging with the film’s actual story: “[hooks’s] indictment of *The Piano* as a misogynistic film may reside more squarely with the film’s critical reception than in her having exhausted potential readings of the narrative text itself” (142). Just how much the distribution of a film may be impacted by its reviews is a hot topic in film culture and a complicated debate.

The distinction between a film itself and its reviews can be quite difficult to make, for while reviews in periodicals can lend insight into how films are read and interpreted by *some* individuals, they obviously can’t represent the thoughts and emotions of *all* viewers. Because reviews are *public*, however, they may very well help to shape what come to be known as widely accepted readings of a film. In truth, it is certain that the movie industry takes film reviews very seriously, as evidenced by how often quotes from choice film critics are cherry-picked from reviews and incorporated into a film’s promotional material. Pribram notes an important difference between independent and mainstream cinema in her observation that independent filmmakers must rely far *more* than mainstream Hollywood filmmakers upon the outcome of critical reviews if they hope to achieve any degree of commercial success. The influence of reviewers, she explains, “may be even greater for the independent industry, which considers positive reviews an important measure of a film’s likely success in its decision to distribute a

work, and one of the most effective means of promoting it subsequently” (143).

Regardless of the extent of the influence reviewers can have on the reception of a film, the reviews themselves can collectively reveal what the public thinks *ought* to be thought about any particular issue. Without a doubt, while many reviewers likely feel that they don’t mandate what an audience should think about any film in particular, they have a great deal of control over dictating the boundaries of what is thought of wholesome and, under this term, *effective* filmmaking at any particular moment in time (144). Consequently, as Pribram argues, one may just take a look at a collection of film reviews at any one point in history and get an accurate reading of the larger cultural context of the film review and the cultural climate in which it was written (144).

Consider the critical reviews of *The Piano*, which was widely touted as a “love story.” As noted earlier, bell hooks asserts that *The Piano’s* untenable position in the library of art house cinema protects it from the ideological scrutiny that plagues gangsta rap (144), but Pribram astutely points out that much of the sentiments within the critical accolades of the film surely seem reserved for audiences more likely to frequent more mainstream films; after all, sex is what sells. Indeed, the buzz surrounding the film focused more on the erotic “love story” that develops between Ada and Baines than the raw facts of the matter, including that the affair was born from prostitution, coercion, and emotional manipulation, all of which resulted from Ada being forced to participate in a loveless marriage arranged by her father, a plan designed to get her as far away from him as possible, presumably because she’d dared to bear a child out of wedlock. However, this fictional train wreck of human lives was nevertheless hailed as “A wildly beautiful love story!”, “A Masterpiece! A tidal wave of sensuality!” and “A riveting, erotic film”

by various influential film critics (qtd. in Pribram 144-145), revealing the effect that reviews depicting more mainstream interests within a film can have on a film's public reception. If *The Piano* had been more accurately marketed as "the tragic story of a beautiful mute woman who is forced to prostitute herself for the return of her beloved piano, piece by piece, as the instrument is the only means she has of expressing herself emotionally" the film may very well have attracted a considerably smaller audience and not have been nearly as successful commercially.

By the film's end, however, all readings remain potentially ambiguous (161). *The Piano*'s startling conclusion provides further evidence of the film's dichotomy between alternative and mainstream cinema; on one reading, the viewer can walk away from the experience with the happy notion that all is well in the end, that Ada releases herself from the rope, and lives happily ever after with Baines and Flora, and ignore the larger implications of Ada's fate, in which Baines still calls the shots—in the final exchange between the lovers Ada, shy about teaching herself to audibly speak, shrouds her face with a black square of fabric through which Baines kisses her passionately, as if silencing any comprehensible word she may have the gumption to utter.

Another, even darker reading is perhaps more plausible given Ada's character; Ada is drawn down into the ocean's depths with her piano and drowns; the epilogue of the film is merely her pre-death musings of how her life might have unfolded had she chosen differently. Indeed, it seems this is the ending Campion must have intended for her protagonist, who seems most at home within silence, evidenced by her final interior insight: *There is a silence where hath been no sound there is a silence where no sound may be in the cold grave, under the deep, deep sea.* This darker interpretation of *The Piano*'s conclusion is certainly not an ending for the mainstream Hollywood crowd, and

the ambiguity of which ending ought to punctuate a correct reading of the film showcases the desirability of films which are hybrids containing significant elements of both independent and normative Hollywood cinema for audiences, critics, and filmmakers alike.

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“Something more ‘universal:’”

Women, Marketing, and Independent Films

by Stephen Harrick

Stephen Harrick is a doctoral student in the Department of Theatre and Film at Bowling Green State University. His work is published in *Theatre History Studies* and *Baylor Journal of Theatre and Performance*. He has served as Assistant to the Editor of *Theatre Annual: A Journal of Performance Studies* and is past President of The Culture Club: Cultural Studies Scholars' Association at BGSU.

In her essay on the difficulty that women have traditionally had working in the independent film industry, Christina Lane observes that “if a woman’s film fails, executives are more likely to attribute it to her gender than if the same fate befalls a male director” (205). Lane unpacks the many ways in which women have had trouble becoming successful in independent film, from a studio’s poor distribution to lack of marketing to an inability to find a distributor at festivals. Lane effectively spells out how women have had difficulty, yet in the process she does a disservice to not only women independent filmmakers, but independent filmmakers writ large when she suggests that independent films should market themselves based primarily on their differences from mainstream films. In this paper, I will examine the ways in which Lane analyzes women in the independent film industry. I will then offer a counter example that offers a different way of marketing film to niche markets that may prove useful for some films but are not ideal for every independent film. In so doing, I hope to evaluate the ways in which Lane undercuts her own argument by suggesting that independent filmmakers should always cater to specific audiences instead of striving to reach a more universal independent film audience and, subsequently, community.

Before I begin, however, I feel it necessary to proffer my use of an oft-contested term. The “independent” in independent film has caused many critics and scholars to question what exactly makes a film “independent.” For the purposes of this study, I will borrow film historian Geoff King’s ideas on the term. King has even posited three tenets that might make a film independent. “(1) their industrial location, (2) the kinds of formal/aesthetic strategies they adopt and (3) their relationship to the broader social, cultural, political or ideological landscape” (2). King’s list is brief yet specific, and offers a thorough lens for questioning independent film. Necessarily, economic factors

play an important role in whether or not a film is independent, and although this is excluded from King's list, he does look at economics elsewhere throughout his study. Lane considers both economic and cultural/ideological elements in her examination of marketing and independent film.

Lane devotes part of her essay to filmmaker Nancy Savoca. Savoca directed such films as *True Love* (1989), *Dogfight* (1991), and *Household Saints* (1993). However, after garnering critical acclaim and box office success with *True Love*, as well as acclaim for *Dogfight* and *Household Saints*, Savoca had difficulty getting her next film made. *The 24-Hour Woman* (1999) focused on a Latina protagonist who has trouble managing her professional life as television producer and her family life. Savoca tried to make the film, and eventually sought help from others on what she should do. Lane quotes a writer for the *Boston Globe* who asserts that Savoca's friends and financial backers suggested that she change the ethnicity of the main character from Latina to "something more 'universal'" (Graham, qtd. in Lane, 197). Savoca refused to do so and the film, which was eventually released, did poorly at the box office—Lane observes that the \$2.5 million film grossed \$109,000 at the theatres (198). Lane gives Savoca credit for not bending on an issue that seems to have been important to her in the making of the film and, at the very least, Savoca's integrity as an artist. However, by focusing on the failure of the film and emphasizing the fact that Savoca's friends and backers suggested the changes that Savoca ignored, Lane implies, if tacitly, that *The 24-Hour Woman* might have done better if the marketing had catered to a more specific audience. In the long run, Savoca's career was injured by the failure of *The 24-Hour Woman*—since then, Savoca has made two features, neither of which received major distribution. Later in her essay, Lane examines Rose Troche's film *Go Fish*. Lane points out that "Rose Troche's *Go Fish* was one of the

few films to be promoted via *difference*—on the basis of Troche’s identities as woman and lesbian—and it proved successful” (202, emphasis in original). Though she does not state this explicitly, Lane implies that *The 24-Hour Woman* would have benefited from a marketing campaign specifically for Latina(o) audiences, similar to how *Go Fish* was marketed to another marginalized audience—lesbians. I agree with Lane here when she writes that *Go Fish* is different from other films about lesbian characters (especially those made in mainstream Hollywood). But, I disagree that this kind of marketing campaign will always work for other films. We can never know if it would have for *The 24-Hour Woman*, but Lane seems to think that it probably would have worked if those in charge of publicity had sought out a target audience—perhaps holding special screenings for Latina/o community groups or airing advertisements on Spanish language television and radio stations. Some works have attempted to market themselves based on the difference of their content. One example that was extremely successful is *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).

Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* “weaves together the stories of several generations of Gullah descendants who prepare to cross from Ibo Landing to the US mainland in the 1860s” (Lane 198). Therefore, the film revolves around African-American characters who have experienced and lived through slavery. The distributor of the film, a small company called Kino International, hired the public relations firm KJM 3 to handle the marketing of *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash 26). As Jesse Algeron Rhines notes, many “advance word-of-mouth screenings were held for influential Black people from diverse backgrounds. In addition, KJM 3 distributed leaflets describing the film at a variety of venues...likely to attract Blacks interested” (67). Clearly, targeted audience marketing served *Daughters of the Dust* well. By actively seeking out audiences who

would probably have interest in the film but may not go to the movie theater to see independent films focusing on white characters, Dash and KJM 3 made *Daughters of the Dust* a hit. Dash has even pointed out that every showing of the film sold out for the film's opening day at the Film Forum in New York (26). The film earned back twice its budget, and *Daughters of the Dust* won an award at Sundance (Lane 198). Dash has gone on to earn several awards and honors for her filmmaking, which, arguably, may not have happened if *Daughters of the Dust* did not gain such high visibility.

Understandably, not every film will have the success that *Daughters of the Dust* had based on targeted marketing. Nonetheless, those in charge of publicizing *The 24-Hour Woman*, in employing an approach similar to KJM 3's for *Daughters of the Dust* might have seen the same success. In any case, the approach that Lane suggests as an effective marketing approach will not always work out the way it did with *Go Fish* and *Daughters of the Dust*. If *The 24-Hour Woman* had employed this tactic, it may have received a wider audience base, even though the proposed audience might have been smaller in terms of audience members attending the movie theaters. The specific-market audience approach, no doubt, works with certain films. Ultimately, the artists and executives must decide together if the film should reach a wider audience or if it will succeed better with a more narrow audience, as the decision to strategize the marketing of a film is not an easy one to make.

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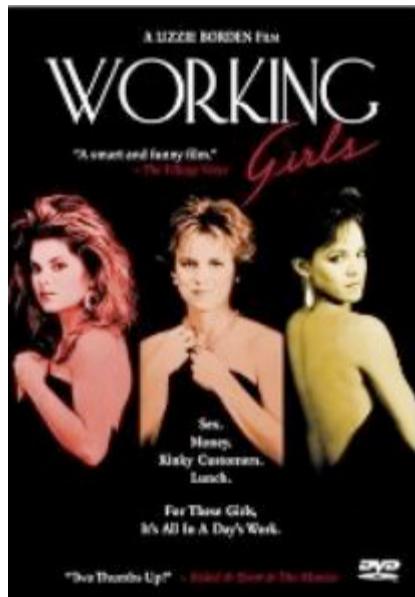
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Avoiding the Male Gaze: The Search For Alternate Ways of “Viewing” Sexual Difference in U.S. Independent Cinema and U.S. Popular Culture

By Rosalind Sibielski

Rosalind Sibielski is a doctoral student in the American Culture Studies Program at Bowling Green State University. Her research interests include media representations of gender, cultural discourses surrounding U.S. feminism, and girl culture. She is currently working on a study of the discourse of girl power in U.S. popular culture.

Laura Mulvey begins her groundbreaking 1973 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” by proposing that “the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” to such an extent that both the visual and the narrative conventions of Hollywood cinema reproduce and reinforce “the straight, socially-established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” within patriarchal culture (14). As a result, she argues, if oppositional representational practices can be found at all it is only in “a politically and aesthetically avant-garde cinema” that intentionally critiques hegemonic cultural values and resists interpellation into the dominant social and symbolic orders organized around those values (16). Mulvey’s theorization of film spectatorship, which relies upon Freud’s writings on voyeurism and scopophilia and Lacan’s writings on the role of the mirror stage in the formation of subjectivity to explain the ways in which cinematic conventions position spectators in relation to images on the screen, has been so influential that, as Richard Maltby sardonically notes, virtually everything written on the subject since its publication has been concerned with either supporting or challenging the “psychoanalytically-based paradigm for understanding the ideological functioning of Hollywood movies” upon which it is premised (535).

Mulvey’s linking of representational practices to a larger ideological project within hegemonic U.S. culture, in which patriarchal constructions of sexual difference and the division of social and political power along the axis of that difference are mapped onto the formal conventions of Hollywood cinema, has also provoked a search for alternate modes of visual representation, among filmmakers as well as film scholars. Building on Mulvey’s contention that the Western cultural privileging of (white, heterosexual) masculine subjectivity is mirrored by what she identifies as a representational split between men as “bearer of the look” and women as the “image” to

be looked at in mainstream narrative films (19), much of this work has been focused on re-framing cinematic narratives and images—as well as models of cinematic spectatorship—outside of the confines of what Mulvey terms the “male gaze” (19). What is politically at stake in such an enterprise, and what has proven the most problematic in terms of how it has been carried out in contemporary cinematic practices, is the question of what qualifies a representation as “oppositional.”

Modes of representation that provide an alternative to established visual conventions are not in and of themselves constitutive of an ideologically resistant or oppositional practice. Instead, they function in oppositional ways only when they critique, challenge or provide alternatives to hegemonic cultural values or systems of belief. Thus, the frequent location of an oppositional representational practice in popular depictions of “women looking . . . at men or at each other,” which Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment suggest in their introduction to the anthology *The Female Gaze* might offer possibilities for “inscrib[ing] a female gaze into the heart of our cultural life” (1), is troubled by the fact that representations of women looking at men or at other women are no different from representations of men looking at women in terms of the ideology such images support if the politics of looking—like the politics underpinning the representations themselves—remain rooted in patriarchal values.

This is true of both popular culture and counterculture texts that appear to take part in this project of inserting a female gaze into U.S. culture’s significatory lexicon as an alternative to Mulvey’s male gaze. In spite of Mulvey’s hope that ideologically subversive representations might be achieved through avant-garde filmmaking practices, and the desire of some contemporary feminist filmmakers and film scholars to locate the potential for such oppositional representations in U.S. independent cinema, the aesthetic commitment on the part of independent films to providing alternatives to the visual styles and narrative structures characteristic of mainstream Hollywood productions does not

always extend to the ideological positions that those films promote, which in many cases can be quite culturally conservative. Thus, while independent films like Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986) or Rebecca Miller's *Personal Velocity* (2002) can be read as feminist critiques of the patriarchal politics underpinning the male gaze, films like Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* (1995) or Larry Fessenden's *Habit* (1997) mobilize the figure of the woman who looks in order to reinscribe patriarchal anxieties surrounding female sexuality within U.S. culture. Contra Gammon and Marshment, Ferrara's and Fessenden's films do not offer an alternative to either patriarchal understandings of sexual difference or patriarchal representational practices that reinforce those understandings, in spite of their fascination with images of "women looking . . . at men or at each other." Instead, they simply employ those images to recapitulate patriarchal discourse in "edgy" or "innovative" ways that are sometimes mistaken for subversive.

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This is also the case with popular texts that similarly deploy a female gaze to frame narratives and images steeped in patriarchal values. For the most part, popular texts that actualize Gamman's and Marshment's call for the articulation of a "female" gaze do not claim feminist status or actively promote feminist discourse, nor do they take up the articulation of a female gaze out of an ideological investment in feminist debates concerning representational politics. Instead, their concern with representations of "women looking," and with emphasizing women's power as subjects who see, is largely

tied in to the power that white, heterosexual, middle-class women currently hold in the marketplace as a target demographic for producers of popular culture and advertisers of consumer products alike.¹ This is not to suggest that popular culture texts have not been or cannot be invested in supporting feminist politics, but rather to point out that the majority of popular texts that invoke a female gaze are not resistant to patriarchal cultural values or to patriarchal understandings of sexual difference; they simply embody those values in female form or frame those understandings through a female point of view. Thus, their endorsement of a “female” rather than a “feminist” gaze allows them to market narratives and images of women’s empowerment, and to promote a viewing practice that is supposedly empowering to women, in which power is still defined and exercised in decidedly patriarchal terms.

This essay examines the representational strategies engaged in by contemporary U.S. advertisements, television programs and both popular and independent films that feature depictions of women who look in order to examine the ideological implications of, and differences between, a “female” and a “feminist” gaze. In doing so, I would like to suggest that the foundation of a counter-hegemonic representational practice upon the generation of images of “women looking . . . at men or at each other” is problematized by its grounding in essentialist notions that assume that women’s antithetical positioning in relation to men within patriarchal culture somehow guarantees that representations relayed through the point of view of women are automatically removed from patriarchal discourse, and can therefore in no way be complicit in its articulation. In this light, as I will discuss further below, the location of an “oppositional” representational practice in acts of “women looking” is troublesome both because it relies upon patriarchal understandings of sexual difference to align men with patriarchy and women with a counter-patriarchal political stance, and because it reproduces a patriarchal significatory economy in which power is equated with one’s ability to assume the role of bearer of the

gaze rather than offering an alternative representational practice in which the gaze is deployed as something other than a tool of (visual) domination.

Female Gaze or Feminist Gaze: Locating an Oppositional Representational Practice

Gamman's and Marshment's invocation of representations of "women looking" as sites of opposition to patriarchal ideology is indicative of the theoretical speculation central to both scholarly and cinematic efforts to formulate an alternative to Mulvey's male gaze, which tend to endorse images in which the camera either depicts the point of view of a female character or presents the male body for erotic contemplation as constitutive of a "resistant" representational practice. Part of this conflation of depictions of "women looking" with a feminist mode of representation rests in Mulvey's initial gendering of the gaze as male, which reduces the significatory and political functions of cinematic representation to questions of gender rather than questions of ideological orientation. In focusing her analysis exclusively on images of women relayed through point-of-view shots framed from the perspective of male characters, Mulvey forecloses consideration of the ways in which the coding of women as objects of fantasy or desire (neither of which, contra Mulvey, are only or always sexual in nature) is a central representational practice within patriarchal culture regardless of whether images of those women are framed through the gaze of a man, another women, or the omnipotent, disembodied gaze of the representational apparatus itself. Indeed, as John Berger's survey of representational practices in Western art from the Renaissance through the 1970s in *Ways of Seeing* and Jane Caputi's study of contemporary U.S. advertising images in *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power and Popular Culture* both demonstrate, images in which women are displayed as objects to be looked at are not only not limited to images framed through the eyes of men, they are also not limited to the cinema, but instead are common throughout all aspects of hegemonic visual culture.

In this light, Mulvey's "male" gaze is best understood, not as a model of how men look at women in cinematic texts, but rather as a paradigm for the ways in which all of us—both male and female—are conditioned by representational conventions to view (in both senses of that term) women within patriarchal culture. The focus of her critique is the manner in which cinematic representations are structured around patriarchal ways of seeing, which sanction a "view" of sexual difference that places women in a subordinate position to men within both the symbolic and the social orders. In this regard, Mulvey's contention that patriarchal understandings of sexual difference structure the visual composition as well as the narrative content of mainstream films is crucial, because it points to the ways in which the enunciative apparatus of the cinema itself is at once inflected with and deployed in service of patriarchal values. Her decision to designate the gaze as "male" rather than as "patriarchal," however, has largely occluded this point, resulting in an unfortunate preoccupation with questions of who is looking at whom in a given image rather than the question of how the ways in which they are looking at one another, or the ways in which we as spectators are looking at them, either support or challenge the dominant manner in which patriarchal culture encourages us to see ourselves and the world around us.

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It has also helped to bolster the misconception that it is the gender that the gaze is assigned rather than the ideology it reflects and reinforces that is the site at which

intervention needs to occur in order to enact an oppositional representational practice, and that therefore changing who is looking at whom—i.e. substituting a female gaze for a male gaze—constitutes a challenge to patriarchal modes of representation. This confusion of representations of female subjects or female subjectivity for an alternative to patriarchal representational practices is evidenced in popular texts that consciously invoke or rework Mulvey's male gaze in order to offer a female counterpoint to it. From the 1985 Levis 501 Jeans commercial featuring British model Nick Kamen stripping to his boxers in a launderette to the appreciative stares of the women around him,² to the 1994 Diet Coke Commercial featuring a group of female office employees ogling a shirtless male construction worker outside their office window,³ to the first season episode of the television series *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2202), “Cro-Magnon,” in which characters Ally, Renee and Georgia spend most of their screen time admiring the physical attributes of the male model in their sculpting class, contemporary U.S. popular culture has been inundated with narratives and images of women unapologetically looking at men with heterosexual desire, which have been variously celebrated for “enabl[ing] an erotic female gaze” (Moore 53) and “probelmatis[ing] and priorities[ing] active sexuality for women in ways that might be regarded as a challenge to the exclusively male gaze of patriarchal structures” (Lewallen 88).

While such representations may indeed promote a “liberated expression of female sexuality” that directly challenges patriarchal constructions of women’s heterosexual desire, as well as patriarchal culture’s silencing of articulations of that desire (Lewallen 86), the difficulty in supporting claims that they are reflective of any kind of resistance to patriarchal ideology arises from the fact that they do not diverge in any significant way from either patriarchal representational practices or the cultural values inscribed onto those practices. All such images do is reverse men’s and women’s respective roles as bearer and object of the gaze, a reversal that still depends upon a sexed division between

those roles to grant the image intelligibility, as well as upholds patriarchal culture's conception and containment of the act of looking within an exclusively erotic context. Far from challenging patriarchal constructions of sexual difference, then, promoting images of the eroticized male body displayed for female visual consumption as a form of resistance to patriarchy ignores the fact that inverting the discursive division within patriarchal culture between man as the subject who sees and woman as the object who is seen in no way subverts the discourses through which sexual difference is established and understood in the first place. Moreover, because a politically "progressive" reading of such images depends upon the premise that women's ability to assume the role of bearer of the gaze is a mark of women's empowerment, the endorsement of the sexual objectification of men as a feminist representational practice ends up reproducing the deconstruction, rather than the reconstruction, of sexual difference as a necessary same division of power along the axis of sexual difference around which patriarchal culture is organized—a project that may very well horrify feminists who see the political tactic.

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The independent films *The Addiction* and *Habit*, which are mentioned above, become significant within this context as well, because they point to an additional problem with inverting the gendered division between subject and object of the gaze as a

counter-hegemonic representational strategy, namely that representing women as bearers of the cinematic gaze does not preclude them from still being simultaneously represented as eroticized objects for spectators to look at, so that the figure of the woman who looks can just as easily be deployed, as it is in these films, to reinforce, rather than to challenge, the socially and symbolically inferior positions that Mulvey argues sexualized images of women framed through the male gaze contribute to. Even more problematic within the context of the location of an oppositional representational practice in images of “women looking,” while both films feature female characters that look with sexual desire upon men as well as upon other women, in both films the act of looking itself becomes a way in which those characters can be eroticized as bearers of the gaze much in the same way that Mulvey argues women are eroticized as objects of the gaze.

Not only is the figure of the woman who looks highly fetishized in both films through shots which present her body for erotic contemplation or provide spectators with voyeuristic images of her engaged in sexual activity, but even the shots in which Catherine in *The Addiction* and Anna in *Habit* are depicted as bearers of the gaze contribute to this fetishization, since viewers watch these women, who are both vampires, watching their victims in a way that still positions them as sexual objects to be looked at rather than as subjects who see. At the same time, because looking is equated with both vampire hunger and sexual hunger in these films, the figure of the female vampire becomes a variation on the femme fatale, whose assertive sexuality is at once threatening and titillating within patriarchal culture, as well as what Barbara Creed has termed the “monstrous feminine,” an archetypal figure who embodies patriarchal cultural anxieties surrounding female sexuality and the female body.⁴ Depictions of Catherine and Anna “looking . . . at men or at other women” in these films, then, contribute to women’s dual coding within patriarchal culture as sites of fascination and horror by equating women’s assumption of the role of bearer of the gaze with sexual potency, as well as with evil, destruction and the collapse of the (patriarchal) social order. Thus, far from providing an

alternative to either patriarchal understandings of sexual difference or mainstream patriarchal representational practices, both films interpellate the figure of the woman who looks into patriarchal discourse by using her to reproduce women's simultaneous positioning within patriarchal culture as objects of desire and objects of dread.

The same is true for texts like the television series *Alias* (ABC, 2001-2006) and *La Femme Nikita* (USA, 1997-2001) or the film *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), all three of which feature a slightly different contemporary variation on the femme fatale: the dissembling seductress who intentionally invites the gaze in order to turn it back upon itself, using her sexuality to her own advantage by deploying it to manipulate the men around her, often with negative consequences for the men in question. These texts trade on postfeminist discourses that equate women's empowerment with a calculating sexuality that is "overtly and publicly" expressed in service of their advancement—whether in terms of career, social status or personal relationships (Levy 26). The problem with embracing this female "play with the heterosexual male gaze"—what Sarah Projanski terms "to-be-looked-at postfeminism" (80)—as a form of resistance to patriarchy is that as either a political or a representational strategy it still reproduces an ideological schema in which the only power women can exercise is through their sexuality, and however else women may be represented they are still coded first and foremost as erotic objects for visual consumption.

The infamous interrogation scene in *Basic Instinct*, for instance, in which the character Catherine seeks to unnerve, and ultimately to seduce, the cop investigating her for murder by crossing and uncrossing her legs to reveal that she is not wearing any underwear beneath her short, tight-fitting skirt, follows in a long tradition of cinematic representations—from the robot Maria in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), to Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (Bill Wilder, 1944) to Matty Walker in *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981), to cite just three of many examples—in which sexually

assertive women display their bodies in an erotic manner in order to manipulate men into doing their bidding. Not only does Catherine's intentional deployment of her sexuality for the purposes of using Nick for her own ends in *Basic Instinct* therefore in no way run counter to either patriarchal notions about women's supposed sexual power over men or cinematic representations that confirm the cultural myth of this power, but in reinforcing the narrative trope of the woman-as-temptress the film also suggests that however intelligent or capable Catherine may be, any empowerment that she evinces derives solely from her seduction skills, a representational strategy that is somewhat counterproductive from a feminist standpoint in that it reinforces women's reduction to their sexuality within patriarchal discourse.

At the same time, while it may be tempting to try to read Catherine's solicitation of Nick's gaze in the interrogation scene as an example of women appropriating patriarchal practices in order to undermine patriarchy, any reading of this film as a feminist film is undercut by the fact that on a visual level the interrogation sequence not only encourages spectators to look at Catherine much in the same way that she encourages Nick to look at her, but in doing so the film also encourages viewers to take pleasure in this sexualized display of her body for public consumption, rather than inviting them to critically reflect upon patriarchal culture's visual fetishization of women. Significantly, when Catherine bares her vagina for Nick and the other men in the room, she also bares it for spectators, who are equally invited to share in the illicit thrill that comes from looking upon the "private" parts of her anatomy in a public setting.

The film may generate enough spectator sympathy for Catherine that some viewers might be inclined to see her manipulation of Nick as his just desserts for objectifying her, but the close-up shot of Catherine spreading her legs accomplishes a similar objectification without any commentary or protest on the part of the film. Ultimately, then, the fact that Catherine has invited the gaze of both Nick and spectators in this scene does not function to critique patriarchal representational practices that objectify women.

Instead, it allows spectators to participate in that objectification without guilt, since within the diegesis of the film Catherine not only complies with this objectification, she actively solicits it.

Rebecca Miller's film *Personal Velocity* provides an interesting counterpoint to popular texts like those mentioned above in which female characters invite the gaze in order to exploit it for personal or professional gain, because while it too engages in a similar visual strategy of inviting the gaze in order to turn it back upon itself, Miller's film does so in order to explicitly and critically comment on the eroticization of women within patriarchal culture, as well as the dual fascination and dread that surrounds women's visual coding as object of the gaze. The narrative of *Personal Velocity* is comprised of three character sketches. The first, which recounts the story of Delia Shunt, opens with a visual invitation for spectators to look at and admire Delia's body. Over a close-up shot of Delia's posterior as she bends over the kitchen sink, spectators are informed via the film's voice-over narration that she has "a strong, heavy ass which looked excellent in blue jeans." However, this pronouncement is followed by the relation of an anecdote in which Delia defends herself against the unwanted advances of a man in a bar by breaking a chair over his head after he grabs at her ass. In this way, the close-up of Delia clothed in tight-fitting blue jeans at once invites spectators to take pleasure in visual displays of her body and shames them for that pleasure, since the juxtaposition of the image of her bending over the sink with a story about her being sexually harassed links the film's positioning of Delia as object of the gaze both with her sexual objectification by the man in the bar and her act of fighting back against that objectification.

This opening sequence establishes a representational pattern that repeats throughout the first section of the film, in which images of Delia displayed or displaying her body for visual consumption are accompanied by narrative moments chronicling

Delia's objectification or abuse at the hands of the men in her life. In a later sequence, a flashback of Delia's high school romance with her husband Kurt concludes with another close-up of Delia's derriere encased in tight-fitting blue jeans, this time framed through the windshield of Kurt's car as Delia perches on the dashboard kissing him. Over this shot, the voice-over reveals that Kurt asked Delia to marry him "because he couldn't stand the idea of any other guy with his hands on Delia, her ass especially." While this close-up, again, presents spectators with an eroticized display of Delia's body which they are invited to take pleasure in looking at, the accompanying narration detailing the pleasure Kurt takes in looking at her body, as well as the possessiveness that this looking engenders in him, subtly work to align spectator's admiration of Delia's body with Kurt's, an identification that is problematized by the fact that the flashback sequence in which this scene appears is bookended by scenes in which Kurt is shown physically abusing Delia. Thus, whatever pleasure spectators are invited to take in images of Delia as the object of the gaze is undercut by the film's linking of these images to events in which Delia is stripped of her subjectivity through objectification or violence, a thematic connection that appears to be explicitly aimed at commenting on the ways in which patriarchal culture simultaneously fetishizes and seeks to punish women's sexuality.

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This point is underscored by the final sequence in the film, in which Delia takes action to take back the power from the teenage patron at the diner where she works, who

takes advantage of the fact that Delia is his mother's employee to make sexual advances towards her. While Delia does not invite the gaze of this young man, she does mobilize her sexuality to turn his gaze back upon itself in a manner that appears on the surface to be similar to the tactics employed by the protagonists in *Alias*, *La Femme Nikita* and *Basic Instinct*. Delia surprises the boy one day by servicing him sexually, and then proceeds to at once establish dominance over him and rid herself of his unwanted attention by mocking his subsequent romantic overtures towards her. Delia's actions, however, diverge from those of the characters in these other texts in a very crucial way that points to *Personal Velocity*'s grounding in feminist politics and sets the film apart from the recapitulation of patriarchal discourse accomplished in the other texts.

Unlike Syndey in *Alias*, Nikita in *La Femme Nikita* or Catherine in *Basic Instinct*, Delia's project of turning the gaze back on itself in *Personal Velocity* is not initiated in out of vengeance against the male sex, nor is it embarked upon for personal gain. Instead, it is a strategy that is presented as a form of self-defense, against which the comments of the narrator about the pleasure Delia supposedly derives from the sexual power that she exercises over men takes on an ironic signification, since Delia is shown using her sexuality as an instrument of power in the film because it is the only way she has to fight back against the power the men in her life seek to exercise over her. Thus, the film does not perpetuate patriarchal myths and fears surrounding women's ostensible sexual power over men in the way that the other texts discussed above do. Rather, it draws attention to the circumscribed place of women within a social and symbolic system that seeks to limit female power to female sexuality.

It is on the basis of this articulation of a feminist critique of patriarchal representational practices that *Personal Velocity* achieves a counter-patriarchal mode of representation. In the process, the film also suggests that when it comes to the search for oppositional representations, it is not a re-gendering of the gaze, but rather a

reconceptualization of the act of looking, upon which a truly subversive representational practice depends. This is the point of contention, as well as the crucial distinction, between positing a “female” gaze as counter-hegemonic representational strategy and positing a “feminist” gaze as a counter-hegemonic representational strategy. While the former assumes that representations of “women looking” are in and of themselves oppositional to patriarchal values, the latter insists that a truly oppositional representational practice cannot be predicated upon the insertion of women into patriarchal discourse, but must instead articulate an alternative way of “seeing” men, women, and their relationships to one another outside of patriarchal constructions of sexual difference.

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Working Through a Feminist Representational Practice: Lizzie Borden’s *Working Girls*

Lizzie Borden’s 1986 film *Working Girls* is significant within this context, because while it enacts a similar visual strategy to *Personal Velocity* for challenging the ideology underpinning Mulvey’s male gaze as a representational practice, like *Personal Velocity* it does so on the basis of feminist politics instead of on the basis of images of “women looking . . . at men or at each other.” Rather than appropriating the gaze for use by female characters or turning the gaze of male characters back upon itself, the film self-reflexively employs formal conventions of editing and cinematography to subvert spectator expectations in relation to the ways in which the gaze is deployed. In the

process, it calls attention to the gaze as a representational framework in order to critically comment upon, and perhaps also to undermine, its cultural power as an instrument of patriarchy.

Set in an upscale Manhattan brothel, *Working Girls* chronicles one day in the life of its protagonist, Molly, a photographer with degrees in literature and art history from Yale, who is employed as a sex worker. In spite of its salacious subject matter, the film goes to great lengths to depict sex work as work, avoiding the eroticization of pornography, as well as the romanticization or glamorization common to representations of prostitutes in Hollywood films, where sex workers are invariably coded as femmes fatales, “hookers with hearts of gold,” or tragic victims in need of rescue or redemption. Instead, *Working Girls* places emphasis on the economic nature of the sex industry. There are repeated shots in the film of money being exchanged—between the clients and the women working at the brothel, between the workers and Lucy, the brothel owner—as well as shots that track Molly’s profits as she makes entries into the notebook she uses to keep track of her earnings after she leaves each client. This visual focus on monetary transactions codes sex as a commodity in the film, which is routinely bought and sold within the apartment out of which Lucy operates her business. That it is a business is underscored by the conversations between Molly, Dawn and Gina concerning their hours, their working conditions and their pay, as well as between Lucy and the three women concerning Lucy’s business philosophy, the conditions at other houses, and the need to attract and retain regular customers. It is also underscored by the attitudes Molly, Dawn and Gina express towards their work, which is depicted in the film as sometimes demeaning, sometimes dangerous, primarily monotonous, and rewarding only in a monetary sense.

Like Chantal Ackerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), *Working Girls* self-consciously employs cinematic conventions to

comment upon the nature of sex work for the workers involved, as well as to convey a sense of the tediousness and routine of their working hours to viewers. The scenes in the interior of the apartment are shot entirely in close-up or medium close-up, emphasizing the confined spaces of the rooms in which the women spend their working hours, and in which Molly, Dawn and Gina are often crowded by the furniture and crowded into the frame. The sense of claustrophobia conveyed through such shots is furthered by the minimum of editing within scenes. There are cuts between scenes, signaling the passage of time or a change in location to a different room within the apartment, but there is relatively little cutting between shots within scenes. A large number of scenes are also shot entirely with a static camera, in which the only movement is the occasional pan to follow characters as they move within the frame. As a result, for the majority of the film the gaze of the spectator is confined within the boundaries of the frame, with very little movement or change in perspective to relieve the resulting visual stagnation. Against such shots, Lucy's oft-repeated greeting to clients, "What's new and different," takes on a particularly ironic connotation, since the cinematography suggests that to the women working in the brothel very little ever is. Similarly, static shots of the women flipping through magazines or staring off into space while waiting between clients function in much the same way to signify boredom, with the lack of any camera movement and the duration of the shots combining to convey a sense of tedium and the slow passage of time.

In this way, the film engages in visual strategies that seem to enact something very close to the destruction of visual pleasure that Mulvey calls for as a "radical weapon" against both patriarchal cinema and patriarchal viewing practices (15). The visual style of *Working Girls* is much closer to the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema than to those of experimental or avant-garde film, in spite of the fact that it is directed by an independent film director known for pushing the boundaries of conventional film form. The camera does not call attention to itself, but instead works to

remain invisible, with framing, camera angles, and camera movement kept unobtrusive. When editing is used in the film, it is uniformly continuity editing, which avoids the effects of distantiation or disorientation employed by avant-garde cinema to prevent audiences from “loosing” themselves in the images. Indeed, like most orthodox narrative films, *Working Girls* not only follows a linear plot, but the formal conventions of the cinematic medium used by the film are deployed to suture spectators into the diegesis rather than to alienate them from it. And yet, *Working Girls* uses these conventions in highly self-reflexive ways, exploiting viewer expectations concerning the relationship between visual style and visual pleasure in order to create an un-pleasurable viewing experience—at least in the sense that the pleasures of identification and desire that Mulvey argues are gratified through the formal conventions of classical Hollywood cinema are denied by their use in *Working Girls*.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the film’s deployment of the gaze, which is used neither to encourage identification between spectators and its protagonist, nor to frame Molly or any of the other female characters as erotic objects to be looked at by spectators, but rather to comment upon women’s status as sexual objects within patriarchal culture. *Working Girls* is replete with images of Molly dressing, undressing, or standing in the nude, sometimes for male clients and sometimes alone, where she is only witnessed by the camera and the film’s spectators. The composition of these shots, the ways in which they are lit, and the ways in which they are framed all play against audience expectations by working to de-eroticize, rather than to eroticize, her, however. These shots are not deployed to encourage spectators to look at and admire Molly’s body, and they are certainly not deployed to invite spectators to see her as a site of fantasy or desire. Instead, they are used to encourage spectators to critically examine the work that Molly does and the conditions under which she does it.

The film's commentary on sex work, as well as its commentary on the coding of women as sexual objects within patriarchal culture, is illustrated by the frequent shots framed through mirrors, which simultaneously exploit and subvert the link Mulvey identifies between visual pleasure and voyeurism in classical Hollywood cinema. These shots invite spectators to covertly view Molly engaged in sexual acts, but in doing so, they function to call attention to and to comment upon this desire to "see" on the part of spectators. At the same time, these shots also undercut any coding or reading as erotic by focusing attention on Molly's boredom or discomfort, as, for example, in the sequence detailing her session with Bob at the beginning of the film, in which she is made to pose in sexual positions with him in front of a full-length mirror, and in which we see her reflected expression looking back at us with a mixture of disinterest and distaste.

Similarly, shots like the one in which Molly undresses before the mirror in the bedroom, and in which, over her shoulder, we watch Jerry watching her undress, can be read within the context of John Berger's analyses of the ideological function of images of women in front of mirrors in Western art. Berger suggests in *Ways of Seeing* that such visual depictions of women watching others "watch[ing] themselves being looked at" (47) are deployed to condition women to "connive in treating [themselves] first and foremost as a sight" within patriarchal culture, with the mirror "often used as a symbol of the vanity of woman" which allows them to at once be "depicted for [the viewer's] pleasure" and "morally condemn[ed]" for appearing to acquiesce to their objectification (51). The shots of women undressing or grooming themselves in front of mirrors in *Working Girls* can be read against this representational tradition rather than as participating in it, however. In the film, the women display themselves to be looked at because they are paid to do so, and, as in the case of the scene with Jerry mentioned above, in which Jerry is portrayed as a thoroughly unsympathetic character whom Molly expresses unqualified antipathy towards, it is the bearer of the gaze rather than the object of the gaze who is made subject to moral censure through these images, since while Jerry

as the spectator's proxy may enjoy looking at Molly, Molly clearly does not enjoy being made a "sight" for him to look at.

In this way, as in *Personal Velocity*, the film does not turn the gaze back on the male characters whose looks motivate the image, but rather back on spectators who are viewing those images. All of the shots in which Molly and the other women are presented to be looked at are carefully framed from the point of view of the camera itself rather than the point of view of any characters within the diegesis. What these shots seem to call attention to and to comment upon is therefore not the cinematic convention of constructing images around the visual dynamic of men looking at women, but rather the nature of the gaze as a visual convention in which we as spectators—regardless of gender—are made complicit in (and derive pleasure from) patriarchal culture's coding and display of women as objects to be looked at. Thus, the film turns the convention of the gaze itself back on itself in order to change its function and the meanings derived from it as a mode of representation.

This use of hegemonic representational practices to critique their hegemonic function makes it possible to read *Working Girls* as an attempt to bring feminist discourse into U.S. cinema. In the process, the film is arguably able to "highlight the ways in which [the cinema's] formal preoccupations reflect the psychical obsessions of the society which produced it" (Mulvey 15), and so to satisfy Mulvey's call for resistance to patriarchy through the production of films that "break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire" (16). It does so, however, without having to relegate either feminist politics or feminist representational practices to the cultural margins of the avant-garde as Mulvey does. This is a crucial political strategy, because it not only challenges the inscription of patriarchal ideology onto and through the representational conventions of narrative cinema, but it also challenges

patriarchal culture's division between the feminist and the cultural mainstream, which has largely precluded the articulation of feminist discourse within conventional media forms.

“[*Working Girls*] not only challenges the inscription of patriarchal ideology onto and through the representational conventions of narrative cinema, but it also challenges patriarchal culture’s division between the feminist and the cultural mainstream, which has largely precluded the articulation of feminist discourses within conventional media forms.”

Ultimately, then, while *Working Girls* comes closer than any of the other popular culture or counterculture texts discussed above to successfully enacting a feminist intervention into hegemonic representational practices, this success stems from the film’s articulation of a feminist gaze rather than the “female” gaze that media scholars like Gamman and Marshment champion as a subversive representational strategy. Instead of trying to fit—or to force—patriarchal representational conventions into a feminist framework, *Working Girls* employs a feminist framework to explore the possibility of creating an alternative representational practice that is both resistant to patriarchal ways of seeing and pleasurable because of this resistance. In the process, *Working Girls* also demonstrates the ways in which a counter-hegemonic (and thus, a counter-patriarchal) representational practice must be based on something more than just images of “women looking . . . at men or at each other,” since it is ultimately politics, and not gender, that structures both patriarchal representational practices and patriarchal ways of seeing, and therefore politics rather than gender upon which any kind of oppositional representational practice must be founded.

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