

The Feminist Text in Film

WOMEN'S PICTURES: Feminism and Cinema

By Annette Kuhn

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BY SUSAN LURIE

hat makes a film "feminist"? Is it enough that the director is a woman, or must the film address certain political issues, or use specific movie-making techniques, or be interpreted by feminist film analysis?

The question of the feminist text in film — paralleling similar inquiries in literature and other arts — has assumed an increasingly significant role in recent critical theory. In the last decade such magazines as *Jump Cut*, *Camera Obscura*, *Discourse* in the U.S., *Screen* in England and *Cahiers du Cinema* in France have vigorously engaged both the question of the feminist film text and that of its necessary point of reference: The assumptions and processes that characterize Hollywood-type films — that is, dominant or "masculine" cinema.

Annette Kuhn, a member of the editorial board of *Screen* has been an important contributor to this international debate, and with the publication of "Women's Pictures" she offers a welcome full-length study of the relationship between feminism and cinema. It is a relationship, Kuhn stresses, which must be understood in light of how mainstream movies construct meaning and pleasure for the spectator.

Most of us, for example, are unaware of the "continuity editing" that creates cinematic realism, the cutting and splicing of separate images that produce the apparently seamless, coherent narrative unfolding before our eyes as if it were whole. As spectators, we are quite used to ignoring



Shower scene from "Psycho"

the large "gaps" of space time and action that can slip between shots that seem bound together by the narrative.

Similarly, few of us are conscious of how other specifically cinematic components function to create meaning: close-ups and long-shots, the actual composition of each shot, various camera movements all tend to disappear for us in the flow of the narrative. And this whole process of cinematic fascination is bolstered by the voyeuristic nature of the spectator's look — protected, hidden, by the darkness of the theater and graciously tolerated by the actors who do not "look back."

But while an analysis of how Hollywood-type films are put together — which Kuhn provides clearly and in depth — is important to both

feminist film theory and practice, it does not in itself constitute a feminist approach. Concerned specifically with the representation and meaning of "woman," feminist analysis involves, says Kuhn, "making visible the invisible." Early efforts focused on revealing stereotypic and exploitative images of women; Molly Haskell's famous "From Reverence to Rape" is one such study.

More recent work, however, goes further, considering how the entire cinematic apparatus collaborates to produce the meaning of woman. What, for example, is the meaning of a particular close-up of a woman in a certain sequence of shots? How does her position in such a sequence place her in relationship to other characters or to the very space she inhabits? How is the woman seen by other characters, by the camera?

In the effort to understand how a cinema creates the meaning of woman, feminist theory has both adopted and questioned already existing bodies of theory. Semeiotics (the study of how meaning is constructed), structuralism and psychoanalysis have all been influential, and Kuhn offers remarkably accessible overviews of these complex discourses.

Central to this inquiry is the question of what is absent from the screen — what literally is invisible in the "gaps" between visible shots. This is the material that the film narrative must cut out, must — in psychoanalytic terms — repress. What turns up missing again and again, Kuhn concludes, are authentic representations of women's experience, specifically female sexuality by an experience.

It is no surprise that these areas — authentic female sexuality and woman's side of the story — take center stage in films intended as feminist. While many use conventional film-making techniques — such as editing for narrative continuity, encouraging identification with characters — to get their message across, others include a critique of cinematic conventions in their message.

This feminist "counter-cinema" sees a link between the technical strategies of mainstream films and the sexist ideology they so often espouse. By undercutting those strategies, feminist counter-cinema places the spectator in a more active and questioning position so that attention is called to how conventional effects are achieved. Films of this sort might interrupt the narrative in various ways, leave out expected information, emphasize the presence of the camera by actually showing it, blur the image, etc. But, again, such disruptive techniques — which feminists have appropriated from avant-garde filmmaking — do not in themselves guarantee a feminist film. Counter-cinema strategies are feminist only when in the service of feminist content.

"Women's Pictures" is an ambitious book that begins by stressing that neither feminism nor cinema is a clear-cut, easily defined operation, and goes on to fulfill its ambitions admirably by charting the history of (and possibilities for) a complex relationship between the two. □

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'SAPPHIC POEMS'/Continued

its Elsa's particular achievement." One reason for Gidlow's success is that she insists on probing the surface of the sensual, taking us deep into the regions of love. For it is love that fascinates Gidlow. Even in her earliest poems, when physical longing is most urgent, she insists on stepping back from desire, refusing to allow romantic obsession and preoccupation with lost love to keep her from enjoying life's beauty. Thus in "Earth Wisdom," she will not "miss what is/burning for what is not." In fact, she concludes, the absence of the beloved may enhance physical pleasure:

*"Foregoing you, still find you in all bliss
And know your lips on every mouth I
kiss." (1932)*

With the deceptive simplicity of an Emily Dickinson and the questioning, analytical mind of the later Yeats, Gidlow associates physical desire

Sausalito writer Jane Fitcher is the author of the novel "Crush."

with human longing for the spiritual wholeness. Sometimes other human beings, even love itself, cannot fulfill this need:

*There is a loneliness of the mind that fills
All space: loneliness that knows
Itself beyond the ministry of love.
—"Ultimate Loneliness" (1934)*

Time and again, Gidlow turns back to the natural world for comfort. The wild swan, the wind, the eucalyptus bark, the oak, the seed — all root her in the earth and in her own woman's spirit — the mother, the goddess.

Never confessional, Gidlow's restraint sometimes suggests that of a Japanese courtesan who, not coyly but with great discretion, lifts her fan above her face before discussing her most private self. "My love of poetry has sometimes been labeled 'apolitical,'" writes Gidlow in her introduction. "But I believe that celebrating our ecstasy and our freedom, singing love songs for and to women is political." □