

## Introduction: 1970s Feminist Film Theory and the Obsolescent Object

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Working on this book with Anna has for me been an illuminating and exciting experience, but it has also in some ways been disorientating. Due to our decision to concentrate on contemporary issues, new perspectives on recurrent debates, and contributions from relatively young scholars, I have experienced at first hand the generational gap between now and my own early writing about women and film. As a result, this introduction reflects on changing histories and ideas that have affected the film and feminism conjuncture over the last four decades. But there is a particular twist of fate for me: the opportunity to look backwards offered by this introduction exactly coincides with the fortieth anniversary of the publication of my essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." This accident of timing has made it difficult for me to avoid considering some of the questions raised by the "1970s" and the various aspects of feminist film theory and experimental practice that are rooted there.

Looking back, the decade clearly stands at the end of an era: politics, economics, and the cinema itself were all, quite soon, to undergo radical changes. In the UK, the decade's film culture was defined and unified by its extreme experiments in critical writing and in filmmaking, movements that overlapped and influenced each other. Of course, by and large, it was the various "theories" (psychoanalysis, Marxism, and semiotics) that characterized the experiments and have rendered them so controversial, especially in the context of feminism and film studies. It is sometimes forgotten that the cultural context that produced the theoretical essays and the experimental films, often themselves experimenting with theory, was not academic. And there has always been an uneasy mismatch between the polemical and insistently radical work of the time, certainly not intended for a student audience, and its rather too abrupt adoption into "film studies" once they ultimately arrived in the academy. (For instance, to go to my personal story: I left university in 1963 and although I gave a couple of lectures in the aftermath of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," my first academic position was not until 1980.) But that intellectual and creative environment, the utopian desire to fuse radical aesthetics with radical politics, energized the 1970s; although the movements that had fuelled its ideas ended with the decade, its influence per-

sisted for some time, probably fading away during the 1980s. Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979 rapidly transformed the political and economic condition of the United Kingdom. Under various pressures, experimental film either went into decline or evolved towards other media heralding the present eclipse of the 16mm format that had sustained the film production of the time. Less parochially, beyond the borders of the UK, neoliberalism, globalization, and their political and social fellow travelers gathered momentum. From the perspective of the cinema, the arrival of VHS in the 1980s saw the first fragmentation (leaving aside television) of film spectatorship. The 1970s would be the last decade in which films could only be viewed by the public, collectively, projected and in a darkened theater.

I am re-rehearsing these points that are, of course, quite well known (and that I have made before, at greater length, in various contexts<sup>1</sup>) for a purpose: to emphasize the lack of continuity across the decades. I argued at length in *Death 24 x a Second: Stillness in the Moving Image*<sup>2</sup> that changes in modes of spectatorship between the 1970s and the late 1990s render the premise and argument of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" archaic. To all intents and purposes, the obsolescence of those habits of filmgoing affect the mentality of the decade with a similar obsolescence: its utopianism and the belief in progress that was so formative for the early years of the Women's Liberation Movement failed to survive the setbacks of the 1980s. Furthermore, the feminist theory and the feminist films of the decade have since been roundly and widely denounced; and the ideas associated with the time seem to have only occasional bearing on the work of scholars today. It might, indeed, be tempting to accept that those ideas have lost whatever currency they might once have had. As feminist film theory moved forward to engage with and benefit from ideas associated with the politics of race and queer theory, 1970s film feminism was left looking somewhat white and heterosexual.

However, such an all-encompassing rejection would, from two points of view, be mistaken. In the first instance, it might be worth going back to some of the neglected issues that underlay or generated the politics of "visual pleasure." Secondly, it is more rewarding to think about time, and a period that has now become history, as a confusion of temporalities than as a linear succession in which decades and eras follow each other in chronological order. And this argument, needless to say, is more in keeping with feminist attempts, whether those of historians or of experimental filmmakers, to interrogate traditional history, reconfiguring its assumptions and greatly expanding its social scope. Both the form and the content of history as narrated primarily from a male subjective consciousness have by now been challenged from multiple points of view, and certainly not only by women. But women, aware of their collective irrelevance to traditional accounts of history as well as their collective absence from its construction, have every interest in imagining feminist ways of conceiving time.

In her essay "Women's Time' in Theory," Emily Apter discusses Julia Kristeva's "Women's Time" in conjunction with recent aesthetic debates in the US on obsolescence. She suggests that the *démodé* has "a multivalent capacity as an aesthetic function of women's time."<sup>3</sup> Reflecting on Moyra Davey's photographs, she comments that: "Davey's work, in its focus on the aging of modernism, poignantly engages with the psychic attraction to period aura that attaches itself to outmoded things."<sup>4</sup> And she argues that the *démodé* as a mechanism "makes possible the radical dispossession of time. There is a temporal violence to *out-dating*; when it erupts it loosens periodicity's possessive perimeters around spots of time and releases arrested images into the future."<sup>5</sup> She continues: "In this reading, it is precisely the 'dated' character of Kristeva's *temps des femmes* that matters, for it describes the anachronistic resurgence of 'seventies theory' in the guise of feminist theory now, itself focused on time and periodicity."<sup>6</sup> And she ends by commenting: "There is then a 'becoming feminist' of time theory itself."<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, I was struck by Apter's argument, as it clearly coincides with my aspiration that, precisely in its obsolescence, feminist film theory of the 1970s might still re-emerge in a new context and for unexpected uses. Furthermore, in the very citation of its aging, modernism is liberated from the detrimental doubling of the "post-"formation that petrifies it in anamorphous past and in subordination to its supposed successor. This in itself is a reminder of the complex temporalities of the modernist avant-garde as opposed to the somewhat clichéd aesthetic of historical citation that characterizes postmodernism. Ultimately, Apter draws attention to the strategic importance of time, history, and temporality for feminist theory. This discussion of a particular confusion of time evokes Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian*, cited by Sophie Mayer in her essay in this volume. In the experimental cinema she discusses, the ghosts of repressed, unacknowledged lesbian loves refuse to be laid to rest, returning in "small" or "poor" films, bringing together this form of apparitionality with traces of theory and theoretical filmmaking to resist the fullness of representation. Although not necessarily central to Mayer's argument, it is interesting to see ghostliness and resistance to temporal linearity materialize together.

These two "figurations" of temporality – the obsolescent, the ghost – suggest, first of all, that feminism should think radically about configurations of time, resisting (as, indeed, has often been argued before) the chronological and the linear that are blind to the persistence of the past in the present. This is, in itself, a theoretical position. But both are also searching for ways of bringing divergent "women's times" together, although there is an obvious contrast between silence and erasure in the past that contemporary lesbian theory is bringing to a poetic consciousness and the over-wordiness of feminist 1970s theory, its flaunting of intellectual excess. One floats, the other is rooted in a particular moment. The first step in any re-cycling of feminist theory should be to locate it within the specific mentality and the ideas that women were attempting to articulate at the

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time. To return to the analogy of obsolescence: an archaic or *démodé* object derived its use value from its place in a given social-economic system but returns later with an altered meaning and significance attached to it. Thus, and as a subsequent step, any re-appropriation or re-cycling of feminist theory today should neither be “as such” nor a strange survivor lingering and aging across the chronological decades but rather rethought in terms of women’s contemporary oppressions. And it seems to be widely acknowledged that, with the economic poverty and precariousness of neoliberalism, the loss of a socialist aspiration, and the massive rise of religion of all kinds, women are newly vulnerable. Several of the essays in this book suggest that, whatever advances there may be in terms of women’s equality and women’s “right” to the possession of their own sexuality (whether lesbian or heterosexual), there is a greater darkness than in the more utopian 1970s. Janet McCabe uses “nordic noir” to explore the ways that women, and particularly migrant women, are victims of violence and misunderstanding in the television series she analyzes. From a very different perspective, Anna Backman Rogers demonstrates through *GIRLS* that even once it is individually owned and liberated into experiment, women’s sexuality and desire are confused by the very darkness of its advanced, privileged, and commodified context. Although in the 1970s Marxist psychoanalytic feminism attempted to think across the economic and psychical, it was hard then to make the links and connections out of the workings of a social unconscious into the other materiality of injustice and exploitation. As this book demonstrates, feminist theorists are now working to connect these missing links.

I want to look back briefly and sketchily to the development of feminist thought in the 1970s. And then I want to speculate about ways in which the cinema has and might still function as a social and symbolic terrain in which to decipher the fluctuations in the meaning of femininity across differing ideological and economic contexts. First to reiterate: above all, 1970s feminist theory (film and beyond) is associated with the influence of Freud and the use of psychoanalytic ideas for a feminist critique of patriarchy. And it is this theoretical conjuncture that has attracted most opprobrium. At the time, the appropriation of Freud seemed reasonably straightforward: as feminists searched for a way of understanding the sources of women’s oppression, questions of sexuality and gender came more and more to the fore. This point may seem banal, but for the Women’s Liberation Movement it was urgent and novel. The well-known slogan “the personal is political” led directly to the unspoken of the sexual in the everyday. The encounter between feminism and psychoanalysis, rooted in the 1970s, continued to be elaborated in the 1980s. As Sally Alexander put it in an essay first published in *The History Workshop Journal* in 1984:

Feminism looked outward at the social forms of sexual division and uneven destinies that claim the two sexes, but the critical look becomes an inquiry

into the self and sexual difference and asks “what am I a woman, and how am I different from a man?” No social relationship is left unturned, if only by implication, in this endeavour.<sup>8</sup>

Alexander points out that psychoanalytic theory “poses the issue of psychic reality – a reality like Marx’s concepts of commodity fetishism and exploitation will not be encountered through empirical observation.”<sup>9</sup> It was this that made psychoanalytic theory both exciting and useful to feminists: it made the invisible visible and it provided a vocabulary and a set of concepts that could enable a first articulation of the place of sexuality in women’s liberation.

It is easy to forget that the early feminist critique of Hollywood cinema was the direct legacy of the Women’s Liberation Movement’s revolt against sexually exploitative images such as adverts and Miss World. Although many of us at the time – for instance in the UK, Pam Cook, Claire Johnston, Elizabeth Cowie, and me – had an already given cinephile involvement with the cinema, politically we analyzed it for its exemplary place in “the society of the spectacle.” Thus questions of cinema, initially at least, were above all questions of politics. Psychoanalysis and semiotics enabled feminists to grasp the gap between “women” in their social context and, to adapt Teresa de Lauretis’s term, “woman” as a signifier that referred to the male psyche and the patriarchal unconscious. As Teresa de Lauretis pointed out in her 1984 book *Alice Doesn’t*:

If feminists have been so insistently engaged with practices of cinema, as critics, filmmakers, and theorists, it is because the stakes are especially high. The representation of woman as image (spectacle, object to be looked at, vision of beauty – and the concurrent representation of the female body as the locus of sexuality, site of visual pleasure, or lure of the gaze) is so pervasive in our culture, well before and beyond the institution of cinema, that it necessarily constitutes a starting point for any understanding of sexual difference and its ideological effects in the construction of social subjects, its presence in all forms of subjectivity. Moreover, in our “civilisation of the image,” as Barthes has called it, cinema works most effectively as an imaging machine, which by producing images (of women or not of women) also tends to produce woman as image. The stakes for women in the cinema, therefore, are very high and our intervention most important at the theoretical level [...].<sup>10</sup>

If Freud’s theory of the sexual instincts made possible a feminist, political interpretation of questions of sexuality as such, they had a particular relevance to the representation of woman on the screen. I want to reflect on, or rather speculate about, the question of the “woman as spectacle” from a different perspective, one that takes a different road from the psychoanalytic but one in which the sexual, and thus psychoanalysis, are never far away. In a juxtaposition between two



completely differing social and symbolic contexts, the Hollywood of early feminist theory and post-revolutionary Iran, I would like to suggest that femininity is, in both cases, understood as a signifier of the sexual. The cinematic languages that then materialize, first of all, indicate the shifting and unstable nature of the signifier and then confirm the centrality of female sexuality in a society that attempts to repress it as well as in one where it is commodified as spectacle. This brief discussion is an attempt to introduce political and economic factors to debates about the psychic and semiotic image of "woman."

It is important to remember that the cinema that preoccupied early feminist film theory was primarily Hollywood. The reasons for this seemed clear: the "woman as spectacle" and "narratives of desire" lay at the heart of studio system cinema and thus lent themselves particularly to psychoanalytic criticism. But other reasons were not so clear at the time and reach beyond the psychoanalytic to the social and the economic, above all to the place of the Hollywood film industry in the United States, in terms of both its national and international history. In this sense, while Freudian theory might illuminate the sexual drives and instincts that gender Hollywood cinema, this very investment in spectacle, in woman as spectacle and woman as signifier of sexuality, has roots in material histories that demand other explanatory approaches. Mary Ann Doane, in her essay "The Economy of Desire" (in *The Desire to Desire* of 1987) locates her argument that the female subject is, *par excellence*, both consumer and consumed in a complex chain of commodity exchanges, in a wider historical context:

The development of the cinematic institution is frequently associated with the rise of consumerism. Overproduction toward the end of the nineteenth century, together with Henry Ford's development of "line production" in 1910 and its intensification during World War I, led to a situation in which there was an excess of material goods and a scarcity of consumers, a condition that led to the perfection of advertising and marketing strategies geared toward a mass audience. Positioning the labourer as consumer was also an effective means of countering an emerging resistance to the industrial and corporate structure on the part of the workers.<sup>11</sup>

This close connection between Hollywood cinema and commodity culture fed into an ideology of homogenization that led to the almost complete exclusion of images of race or of the working class as "workers" on the screen. In response to these areas of repression and erasure, "spectacle" took on extra special radiance, designed to attract and freeze the gaze. And the investment in the white female star as enhanced spectacle, its universalizing implications, could contribute to covering over the ideological cracks with an erotic sheen. Furthermore, the US depended on its film industry for marketing its products abroad. From the end of World War I, Hollywood became *de facto* an international cinema so that, having

mastered a homogenized system of cinematic representation at home, it could be more easily exported transnationally or, in today's terminology, globally. Glamour, a concept that was popularized in 1920s America (originally derived from an association with illusion or magic), evokes the distracting and fetishizing aspects of sexualized imagery that is designed "to-be-looked-at" be it the screen or the star that appears on its surface. To my mind, these various underpinnings of Hollywood glamour and its investment in the spectacle of femininity reach a final but extreme point in the 1950s and the Cold War. Through Hollywood, the US could present itself to the world as "the democracy of glamour;" the economics and politics of capitalism could acquire an allure of desirability in contrast to the image of Soviet communism. Capitalism could signify the pleasure of consumption, while communism represented the toil of production. It seems to be no accident that Marilyn Monroe would symbolize the epoch, almost as though Hollywood, as the national imaginary, was satirizing itself in this precariously constructed image of whiteness and the sexual. Here, psychoanalytic theory returns with renewed relevance: an argument that started off with the question of voyeurism returns with the question of the fetish. In Freud's theory, the fetish is an object that attracts and holds the gaze in a displacement from the sight of something that provokes anxiety. Freud originally argued, of course, that the male gaze has to be protected from the sight of the "castrated" female body. But the concept can be extended by its Marxist use and, as I suggested in *Fetishism and Curiosity: Seeing with the Mind's Eye*, the two easily reinforce and entwine with each other in relation to the cinema.<sup>12</sup>

Drawing attention to the part played by American national cinema, Hollywood, in its international affairs, in its cultural and economic colonialisms, creates a link across worlds to the cinema of the Islamic Republic. Two considerations are key here: after the 1979 revolution in Iran, cinema was abruptly purged of American films and their cultural tropes while simultaneously subordinated to the principles of Islamic modesty. In this context, the image of woman emerges in a reversal of the Hollywood excess, her significance as a signifier of sexuality persists, but raises very different aesthetic questions about how these "signs" were to be managed and their meanings to be translated into the language of cinema. In practical terms, Hollywood imports that had dominated Iran (since the British-American coup restored the Shah to power in 1953) were cut back to almost nothing, and Film Farsi, the popular cinema of the Pahlavi period, was eradicated. Women's appearance on screen came to be strictly regulated and rigorously censored in keeping with the religious ideology of the regime but also as a cinematic return to zero, a public rejection of the decadence and "Americanization" associated with the Pahlavi monarchy.

In the Iranian cinema that subsequently and gradually emerged, erotic femininity was signified by its erasure. Furthermore, in addition to the problem of woman as visual object on the screen, cinematic and narrative contact between

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the sexes were subject to rules that demanded a new visual grammar. The familiar cinematic language – in which point-of-view shots, exchange of looks, and close-ups in particular articulated relations between men and women on the screen – gave way to a stripped-down, minimalist cinema in which the camera kept a distance from its profilmic figures. This enforced visual minimalism, and the rejection of any association with the generic nature of Hollywood, created a dialogue with the small, independent art cinema that had grown up precariously and under censorship since the 1960s. Both the new regime and the independents rejected Hollywood's cultural imperialism and its commercial aesthetic; both wanted cinema to be opened up to the everyday lives and problems of the poor.

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The question of women was further complicated by the implications of veiling. Negar Mottahedeh and Hamid Naficy have both argued that once the Islamic Republic imposed the veil on women, the erotic implications of the look emerged as an articulated and conscious fact of Iranian social life.<sup>13</sup> Inevitably, the issue of the look extended into the cinema and to the new film aesthetic. Under the rule of modesty, the cinema screen was understood to be a public space so that women had to appear veiled in the face of the male spectator at all times. Mottahedeh sums up the paradox: "Iranian cinema's address as a tribute to the carnality of the filmic gaze, and its principled rejection of cinematic voyeurism, produced the national cinema as a woman's cinema."<sup>14</sup> And Naficy also points out that:

The social rules of modesty, the Islamicization of culture, cinema and the film industry, and the filmic aesthetics of veiling and looking served to represent women as modest and chaste, preventing them from becoming sexual fetishes. Yet these representations also replicated the dominant-subordinate relations of power between men and women in society at large.<sup>15</sup>

But he goes on to make a crucial point:

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Thus "purified," the film industry became open to women as a proper profession as long as Islamicate values were observed. Thus there was a trade-off for the imposition of the veil which was that, once veiled, ordinary women could appear in the public sphere legitimately and forcefully, where they could engage in professions usually reserved for men. Cinema became the beneficiary of this doubled-edged sword. For that reason, while the social and professional roles of women in the industry became stronger and more forceful, their screen images continued to be fraught with ideological tensions.<sup>16</sup>

In this further paradox, with the Islamic Republic's support for cultural cinema, a number of women have become directors in Iran, making films that have

pushed, where and when possible, at the boundaries of representation, focusing on those ideological tensions and legal subordinations that Naficy mentions. Once women can claim a critical voice, the status of "woman" as "signifier" is necessarily challenged and modified.

In the first instance, this sketchy juxtaposition between the Hollywood studio system era and the cinema of the Islamic Republic of Iran is intended to draw attention to the difficulty women pose for patriarchal society and how that difficulty emerges symptomatically in their different cinemas. However, alongside the theoretical-psychoanalytic and semiotic questions that male representations of woman pose for feminists, new voices, questions, and social contexts are introduced by women filmmakers. A number of essays in this book discuss and analyze feminist films that gradually bring the marginal and the unspeakable into social and cultural recognition. Rakshan Bani-Etemad, one of the most important women directors working in Iran, has focused on the social significance and the image of motherhood in a country in which mothers are both idealized but also heavily oppressed by their lack of legal rights. In her films, Bani-Etemad begins to break down the connotation of suffering silence associated with the mother. Here there are two important factors: the filmmaker as a woman challenges male cultural domination by making films in a cinema dominated by male directors both globally and historically. At the same time, she challenges the one-dimensional and idealized image of motherhood, opening it out to infinite emotional complexity. But the level of emotion then brings with it the problem of articulating pain and trauma often beyond the reach of ordinary language. Beyond silence, in confrontation with the inadequacy of language, these women begin to express the problem of expression, especially for the silent suffering that haunts motherhood. While representing both the actual lives of women and the difficulty of representing their pain, Bani-Etemad succeeds in combining an aesthetic of social realism with the complex *mise-en-scène* of melodrama.

realism  
+  
melodrama

I began this introduction by emphasizing the divide between my feminist beginnings in the 1970s and the present. And I have tried to recapitulate the way that, at the time, feminist "1970s theory" provided an instrument for the analysis of images of woman under patriarchal society in which femininity and sexuality were displaced and distorted misogynistically. And, to reiterate, the cinema was the social and symbolic terrain in which these images flourished and fluctuated. Quite clearly these kinds of problems of representation persist and still demand analysis. But rather than simply suggest that the theories of the past are straightforwardly relevant to now, I prefer to see them as the kind of *démodé* objects discussed, as I mentioned earlier, by Emily Apter. At the same time, out of their very obsolescence they might revive an interest in the history of feminist thought, its whys and wherefores. In an unpublished paper (which I cite with the authors' permission) Monica Dall'Asta and Jane Gaines reflect on the problem of retrieving a history of women in silent cinema. They note that:

Objects don't tell stories but stories can be told with objects. Now, a peculiar characteristic of the objects of the past is that they resist the kind of causal concatenation that is typical of historical narration. An object is itself not a fact, and it is the narrative that constructs facts in such a way as to provide linkages between documents. Historical objects, however, can be somewhat resistant. This is because the historical objects are "severed" from their original context, removed to another time like unrelated monads [...]. [T]he gap might be seen as productive to the extent that it prompts multiple narratives, no one of which can pretend to exhaustiveness.<sup>17</sup>

From this perspective, early feminist theory (as object and document) might be severed sufficiently from the "now" to be able to produce multiple narratives that lead, in some cases, nowhere, but also to theory as experimental, alongside the avant-garde cinema of the time.

In her recent book, Jacqueline Rose has pointed out that, however far women may advance socially and in terms of progress in equality and rights, these undoubted gains fail to cover the "dark times" or "landscape of the night" in which so many women live.<sup>18</sup> The essays of this book that analyze recent women's filmmaking bear witness to a constant struggle to bring these difficult-to-articulate issues to the screen. And the essays on iconographies make it clear that the female body is still essentially marked by instability and uncertainty. These are the two sides of the feminist political and theoretical coin. It is through the further development of analyses of these kinds, and very particularly the ideas that have developed out of considerations of both lesbian and black aesthetics, that a renewed feminist politics might both be able to find its place in a world "darkened" by unexpected new waves of misogyny but also address a new generation of feminist activists.

## PART I

# New Perspectives: Images and the Female Body