

Feminist politics and film
criticism in Women and Film

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
CRITICISM IN <u>WOMEN</u> <u>AND</u> <u>FILM</u>	3
FEMINIST POLITICS AND FILM CRITICISM	22
NOTES	32
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	37

INTRODUCTION

In 1972 the first issue of Women and Film declared as its goal the creation of a "People's Cinema." The editors admitted to being nonprofessionals who were establishing the magazine as a forum for film debate, especially from a "feminist-Marxist-anarchist direction."¹ The cinema to be established would espouse a collective process of filmmaking that would produce films fair to women and close to the masses.

In conjunction with these general objectives was a particular and self-conscious interest in film criticism itself. The editors stated their position in the first issue.

We wish to change the traditional modes of film criticism dominated by male critics and historians. . . . it is up to the women who suffer the bad end of the cinematic image to initiate a form of film history and criticism that is relevant and just to females and males. Aesthetic considerations have to evolve from this end. We cannot afford to indulge in illusions of art for art's sake.²

This editorial policy makes the assumption that aesthetic and individualistic concerns have been the primary interest of film critics; and, because this approach has encouraged social injustices, it must develop new directions. Such a statement prompts two questions. First, what assumptions, attitudes, goals and methods constitute this criticism as it becomes delineated in Women and Film? Second, does the feminist criticism in this journal provide a valid and worthwhile means of film analysis? The concern of the thesis is with the extent.

of a radical approach to film and its discussion as it is developed in this periodical. Through study of these questions this analysis will ascertain the extent to which the critical stance of Women and Film can make a valuable addition to the body of film criticism.

CRITICISM IN WOMEN AND FILM

Major articles in the six issues of Women and Film published to date include historical criticism, contemporary critical reviews, interviews with filmmakers, and discussions of film theory. This thesis assumes that material included in the magazine meets certain editorial requirements, and, within the framework of those requirements, the individuality of each writer's approach is maintained. The articles, then, may present divergent interpretations and opinions; but, viewed as a whole, they reflect the critical policies of the journal. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the kinds of ideas presented in the journal--to define what these critics are saying.

Three assumptions determine the subject matter and tone of the articles in Women and Film. One, capitalistic society discriminates against women. Two, American commercial cinema, which is entrenched in Capitalism, is a powerful force supporting capitalist economic and social structures. Three, a counter-attack must begin through the development of a new feminist criticism and cinema. These establish the essential political nature of the journal.

In the first issue the editors make clear their alliance with feminism when they write, "The women in this magazine, as part of the women's movement, are aware of the political, psychological, social and economic oppression of women."³

The magazine originates out of a need to free women from their "oppression." Because of that it is not just a forum for debate and dissemination of information about women in film. It is a tool for opposing sexism in society. The editors would hope that it can be a revolutionary tool. Referring to an article in Cineaste by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, they maintain that revolution begins when intellectuals at the forefront of a movement to improve social conditions of the masses begin to study and act for a change.⁴ One means of initiating change is through film.

The struggle begins on all fronts and we are taking up the struggle with women's roles in the film industry--the ways we are exploited and the ways to transform the derogatory and immoral attitudes of the ruling class and their male lackys [sic] have towards women and other oppressed peoples.⁵

The editors' uncompromising attitudes towards the structures of American society are indicated by the tone of that statement. Another indication of the radical form of feminism advocated in the journal is represented by Irwin Silber's criticism of the National Organization for Women (NOW) for encouraging women to join the ranks of the "Establishment" as bankers and stockholders. According to him, this may help individual women, but does not change the social and economic order which discriminates against classes and women.⁶

To the editors sexism and Capitalism are closely aligned because capitalist structures are hierarchial and discrimina-

tory. Women are just one of many groups discriminated against in a highly competitive economic system.⁷ Because of this Marxist attitude toward the American economic and cultural way of life, the battle being waged by Women and Film is not only against sexism but against Capitalism--as it is expressed in the movies themselves and the methods of production in the industry.

According to the editors, film is an important element in the feminist-Marxist struggle because of its power to both reflect and shape social attitudes. In the hands of Capitalism it is a powerful tool. Their position paper says, "Hollywood rules the world."⁸ This statement is probably hyperbole even within the magazine's frame of reference, yet it indicates that its editors view film as a potent political force. Thus, as a capitalistic industry the cinema is an enemy--something to be attacked and discredited. At the same time the power of the movies may be channeled toward promoting the feminist-Marxist goal of a collective society. The editors recognize Stalin's claim, "'Give me the cinema and I'll rule the world.'"⁹

Although many contributors do not seem to develop the Marxist approach and rhetoric of the editorial remarks, all are concerned about the images of women in film. The films created by the commercial cinema are almost universally criticized for simplistic and derogatory female stereotyping. The basis for the attack relies on social and aesthetic considerations.

There is a general agreement among the writers that the film medium has been able to influence the actions of its viewers. Christine Mohanna points out that the "It Girl" of the twenties was not invented by the movies, but her image was reinforced there. She wonders how many women tried to imitate Clara Bow or how many men sought out the sexy but prudish flapper after seeing her on the screen.¹⁰ Thinking of more contemporary films, Sharon Smith says movies help persuade men that women are just waiting for sex with any man who happens to walk by.¹¹ Smith points out that men also suffer from stereotyping. Perhaps living up to the macho image projected at the movies is as difficult as trying to look like Marilyn Monroe.¹²

The editorial policy which denies the importance of aesthetic issues (see p. 1) is not consistent with the practice of many contributors, who often discuss characterization in aesthetic terms. William Dean Howells once wrote of literature, "Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material. . . ." ¹³ Implicit in all serious discussion of film is a belief that, like literature, it is an art form. Otherwise its discussion need only to be descriptive and no more detailed than that of other forms of entertainment --a stock car race description, for example. Hollywood cinema, according to Women and Film, may attempt to be a realistic art form, but it is not "true" because it just does not give full

attention to women as complete characters. It is this lack of full characterization that Sharon Smith deplores when she writes, "Women, in any fully human form, have almost completely been left out of film."¹⁴

Despite the editors' disavowal of the importance of aesthetic considerations, this complaint about the emptiness of female characterization with its concomitant erosion of real insight into women's lives, is an aesthetic concern. If the products of an art form, even a popular art form, do not really touch upon the lives of half the population, it is inferior. This distortion is seen by many contributors as an inevitable result of a male-dominated industry and male-dominated society. Dora Kaplan writes,

Culture is male and the invention of cinema, the art form with the greatest potential for revealing man to himself, has also the greatest potential for revealing woman to herself as seen through the eyes of men.¹⁵

Women accept this definition of themselves by men in the movies much as they do in real life. Here social and aesthetic aspects seem to blur.

Women and Film critics do not deny that one reason for women's subsidiary role in film is that in a male-dominated society women are subsidiary to men. Because women have accepted male authority in their lives, for whatever reasons, they have in the past had little choice other than to accept it on the screen. What the contributors repeatedly emphasize

is that on aesthetic and social levels the needs and conflicts of women are distorted or ignored. If one purpose of an art form is to increase understanding, the commercial cinema has failed.

Examples of female stereotyping considered false and incomplete are found in the historical criticism and contemporary reviews. These are included here to demonstrate some of the specific elements brought up by the contributors. Christine Mohanna explains stereotypes seen in films throughout this century. At the turn of the century were the fragile and child-like Griffith girls who were defenseless against attack, but remained pure of heart. In the twenties came superficially emancipated flappers. They cut their hair, smoked and flirted, but were still "good girls" at heart who eventually settled down to roles of wife and mother. By the beginning of the sound era in the thirties women were back on their pedestals as glamour queens in Busby Berkeley extravaganzas. In that time they were also the fancy possessions of underworld figures in the popular gangster films. "Whether women were queens or molls," writes Mohanna, "they were always infused with a quality of helplessness--in dangerous situations they always needed a man to protect them."¹⁶

As women went to work in the war years of the forties their film roles were expanded. They were active and capable in jobs and professions. But by the time the fifties and six-

ties approached they were back in one-dimensional roles. The most prominent was the sex-goddess. With few exceptions women in the movies were beautiful, passive and destined to be "owned" by some man.¹⁷

An article about two films made in the fifties by Douglas Sirk discusses his probing of the dull imprisonment of women (and men) in the roles which middle class life restricts them to.¹⁸ However, Mohanna and other writers in the journal mainly ignore the "woman's film" which was most prevalent in the thirties and forties. According to Molly Haskell, this genre was severely limited because happiness for the women depended upon their success within the institutions of marriage and motherhood.¹⁹ Perhaps movies in this group are not mentioned in the journal because their emotional conflicts reflected only the limiting codes of "middle-classness."

The writers dealing with contemporary American commercial films complain that despite occasional exceptions women are mainly relegated to sex-related roles (whore, bitch, lover) while men operate in the active area of conflict--man against man, nature, society, himself. Smith writes,

Women provide trouble or sexual interludes for the male characters, or are not present at all. Even when a woman is the central character she is generally confused, or helpless and in danger, or passive, or as a purely sexual being. It just seems odd that these few images, and others like them, are all we see of women in almost every film.²⁰

She adequately supports her statement with examples from

a random sample of movies reviewed in a single issue of Variety. These include Dagmar's Hotpants, Inc., which is about a prostitute in love; Frenzy, where the woman must make love to the madman who holds her hostage; and The French Connection, in which women play only the minor roles of wife and sex object.²¹ Mohanna echoes the same complaint when she writes,

Men are still defined in terms of their accomplishments, their faults, their potential, and women are still defined primarily in their relationships with men.²²

In another article on recent Hollywood trends Siew-Hwa Beh comments that women are seen more and more in the "periphery and negative space of the film image."²³ Junior Bonner, Shaft's Big Score, and Dirty Harry are cited as examples of women's low regard in the movies. A technique such as montage, she explains, follows the male reaction because the story is usually from his point of view. Beh goes on to say that a film such as A Clockwork Orange does not ignore women, but seems intent upon depicting them "naked, raped, or being murdered in large close-ups."²⁴

These examples of kinds of reactions against stereotyping show Women and Film at its earliest stage, where the emphasis is on "consciousness raising." The articles contain many generalizations which are mostly negative and few detailed studies. Their purpose seems to be support for the editors' attack on Hollywood. The editors claim that women are not what they

appear to be in the popular movies; therefore, study of them gives few valuable insights beyond pointing out their inadequacies from a feminist viewpoint. After once denouncing films which fall into the "bad" category of American commercial cinema they are mostly ignored.

Interest in stereotyping does not cease in later articles, but there is definite emphasis on films and filmmakers who provide well-developed female characters. Very few of these articles deal with the American commercial product. Partial explanation for that might rest in the other major objection to Hollywood-type productions--discrimination within the industry itself.

No statistics are given to substantiate the claim that the American commercial cinema discriminates against women. But the editors' assertion that, aside from a few actresses, most women in the industry have low-paying, unskilled jobs does not seem improbable. At least the credits of current movies include mostly men's names behind job descriptions from director to key grip. The other complaint is that System Cinema has an elitist hierarchy which does not give full credit to all the people who contribute to the making of a film.²⁵

Writers in Women and Film are wary of encouraging women to fight discriminatory practices and break into the ranks of American commercial cinema. Sharon Smith asks whether or not more women filmmakers will improve the films produced. Her

answer is a qualified no. She thinks that it will be a long time before women will be fully integrated into the industry. Once that comes about men will still write about women, following old stereotypes. Also, she says, many women, products of a male culture, are anti-women.²⁶ Her analysis implies that vast social changes must take place before the movies change. She is pessimistic about the rate of progress, but does not imply that the commercial cinema should be ignored.

Other writers, especially Irwin Silber and Bill Nichols, following Marxist thinking, suggest that women should not even try to enter into the world of System Cinema--not because they do not have the right, but because it does not serve revolutionary purposes. The rationale is that Hollywood or System Cinema has an industrial organization that is discriminatory; therefore, it is bound to produce films with discriminatory images of women and other groups. If one believes that Capitalism is a direct cause of sex and class discrimination (as the editors do), it follows that its products are bound to be sexist. Films are just "commodities" to be sold. According to Silber, unless that capitalist process can be changed, an individual should not participate in the System even if he or she might profit personally. Because of its many ties to other discriminatory structures, such as banks and the stock market, it is almost impossible for single individuals to produce change from within. Dora Kaplan follows his reasoning

when she writes that it is paradoxical to demand "from the bourgeois cultural superstructure a consciousness which runs counter to the basic class interests of those who control the media."²⁷ It is better to seek means of destroying that industry and creating a more successful form that is not ultimately against sex-class needs.²⁸ To achieve positive results a completely different cinema must be developed.

It is to this new cinema that the majority of articles in issues 3 to 6 are aimed. There are several works dealing with American commercial products but most deal with independently made movies, mostly European, of special importance to feminist interests. European movies do not seem to have the stigma of the Hollywood tag that Women and Film places upon most American movies even though Hollywood as the big American producer of films is a thing of the past. In issues 3 and 4 the editors ask that contributors concentrate on theoretical formations of a feminist film theory. They suggest this should be done in part through analysis of films made independently by women rather than by reviewing the commercial product.²⁹

Discussions of stereotyping with its social and aesthetic implications does not cease to exist in the articles of the later issues, but the subject matter changes to analysis of films and filmmakers of particular interest to women. With only a few exceptions films which have wide United States distribution are ignored. These later articles, though still

developing Marxist-feminist ideas, go beyond a list of grievances against the narrative components of movies. Not just content, but form, production technique and distribution possibilities are discussed in some detail. The articles may be divided into two groups. The first is concerned with how independent films and filmmakers can reveal to women an understanding of their present condition of oppression and, to some extent, their future possibilities. The second is concerned with promoting a feminist cinema through disseminating information about amateur feminist films and investigating the ideas and techniques of women filmmakers.

Those films which concentrate on women's role in contemporary society are concerned with the purposeful or inadvertent theme of woman's alienation and with the recognition that women's problems are derived from the social milieu--not individual situations.--An interview with Barbara Loden, who produced and directed Wanda, supports the need for films which reveal the plight of women. The end of this movie finds the defenseless Wanda alone and lost. According to the interviewers she

is the ultimate victim of a sexist-capitalist society. And Ms. Loden realized that she did not have to physically place Wanda behind bars (as with the real-life model) for the audience to be aware that her heroine is indeed in prison.³⁰

Loden feels that making this kind of film is important because people do not think about the existence of a woman like Wanda.

Replying to a Ms. magazine review which stated that posi-

tive role models should be depicted on the screen, instead of losers like Wanda, Loden says that this realistic portrayal, despite its pessimism, is valid. Wanda shows the way she (Loden) was and the way other women are. She does not feel a need to present solutions--it is enough for her to depict what she sees.³¹ Loden's rationale is accepted by the interviewers, who write that

It matters little if Wanda complies with bourgeois values of success and accomplishment. What seems more relevant is that Loden as a feminist artist explores the situation of women who are suffocated and destroyed, the true 'Silent Americans.'³²

In another article Jacoba Atlas follows the same reasoning when she finds Children of Paradise, Jules and Jim, and Alice's Restaurant to be progressive films from a feminist viewpoint because they show, perhaps unconsciously, the "bankrupt quality of life within the 'puppet show.'"³³

Other reviewers also find it sufficient for movies to reveal the plight of women, but only if it is seen in a societal or class framework. Thus, Beth Sullivan condemns Carl Dryer's The Master of the House (1925), despite its progressive attempts, because he attributes the marital difficulties of the heroine to the tyranny of her husband rather than to a culture which fosters inequality in marriage. She commends Abran Room's Bed and Sofa (1926) which also deals with marital problems. The heroine of this movie comes to understand that her relegation to the role of housemaid will happen no matter what

man she attaches herself to. Sullivan writes that what is really stimulating these problems "is a class society. . . which needs the free labor and services of women in order to expropriate larger profits."³⁴

Objections similar to Sullivan's are repeated in an analysis of Ken Russell's Savage Messiah. In this film Sophie is afraid of sexually demonstrating her love. Russell is criticized because her fear is viewed as a personality problem, not a result of a social environment which once forced her into prostitution.³⁵ Another movie, Sylvia, Fran and Joy, which would seem to fulfill Women and Film requirements because it is independently made by a group of feminists, is condemned on the same grounds. It examines through interviews the lives of three women: Sylvia shares domestic tasks with her husband, Fran is divorced and trying to develop a life of her own, and Joy is a traditional housekeeper-wife-mother and enjoys it. The movie is criticized because liberation or the lack of it is seen as "rooted solely within the individual and as a private affair where any intervention is considered rude." Reviewer Siew-Hwa Beh continues, "This is bourgeois conditioning to keep women forever isolated from one another."³⁶

Two movies by Jean-Luc Godard are praised because their form and content elucidate women's plight in a consumer-driven, violent, male-oriented society. The critic explains that the situation of the individual prostitute, Nana, in Vivre se Vie

is broadened to include women in general. This is done through parallel scenes in which other women are seen forced into prostitution, real or metaphorical. Woman as prostitute, whose violent death takes place during a transaction which would sell her to another pimp, is itself described as a metaphor for women's place in a destructive society. She also feels that use of cinéma-vérité style is effective in making the movie go beyond the story of this one prostitute.³⁷

Chuck Kleinhaus' article on Godard's Two or Three Things I Know about Her remarks that the prostitute theme and the Brechtian technique of distancing of the audience are used to symbolize and promote the themes of the woman's alienation and the troubled social climate. He feels that Godard's objectification of "general malaise," though true and fascinating, is limited because he ignores cause and effect.

At this stage of his own subjective development, then, Godard is at the limit of a negative consideration of society, and specifically dealing with society's sexism. He can show exploitation of women, but he can offer no solutions.³⁸

Kleinhaus implies that solutions are offered in the later Marxist films by Godard, but does not analyze them in any detail.

The theme of these reviews, then, is that to depict women in their traditional roles or in an uncomplimentary manner is acceptable, but only to the extent that this characterization is seen to be a result of debilitating sexist social conditioning. However, some critics do not feel that this is enough.

In her review of The Girls Abigail Child says that director Mai Zetterling shows anger and rebellion in her women characters, but their dependence on dreams is partially causing them to be locked into stereotypes. Child feels that this film suffers because the women characters do not succeed in rising above their predicament. Unlike Barbara Loden, she finds this sort of explication insufficient and asks for other films "to break from our past conceptions of female and to present a 'reality' of clever resolve."³⁹

Several critics do look at films with strong women characters or with the theme of positive feminist reform. Both Dirty Mary (also known as A Very Curious Girl) and Les Stances à Sophie are directed by women. Both show women escaping from male domination. There is no outright decree in Women and Film stating that good films from a feminist viewpoint should have positive role models. However, these films which show women successfully rebelling against their social system are highly praised.

Dirty Mary, made by Nelly Kaplan, is a farce about Mary's revenge (through prostitution) against class and sex exploitation. The lively Mary changes the power situation and exposes male hypocrisy in her small community. The movie is liked by critic Brenda Roman, but she avoids representing Mary's little victory as a symbol of success in the class struggle. She feels it is an entertaining, well-directed film which, for

once, represents as fools men instead of women.⁴⁰ According to the director, this desire for revenge exhibited by Mary indicates a general, if vague, need for women to humiliate or ridicule men in order to become free from their domination.⁴¹

Christiane Rochefort's Les Stances à Sophie is about two friends, Julia and Celine, who develop their own intellectual interests and become lovers. Their husbands do not take them very seriously even when they begin writing a book about the relationship between sex and the male ego. It is only after Julia's death in an auto accident that Celine makes the final break from her authoritarian marriage.⁴² One reviewer finds the content meets the requirements for a radical "feminist film" because the women are aware that they are being oppressed by a male-dominated society. Again there is the recurring criticism that only an individual solution is offered.⁴³

A film purported to offer possibilities which might "free" the society and not just the individual is Murmur of the Heart, directed by Louis Malle. It is praised for, of all things, the "demystification of the incest taboo."⁴⁴ The film features an uneducated woman who shares with her children a "camaraderie that transcends not only sexual differences, but the role distinction between parent and child."⁴⁵ The father of the family (a gynecologist) does not find the family important and is emotionally detached from it. The mother's lovemaking with her son is depicted in a positive manner. After seeing the film,

Dora Kaplan writes,

One can never contemplate the family again without the thought inching in, that the patriarchal family has had it and that the gestures of maternal love and those of love pure and simple are practically the same.⁴⁶

Because Murmur of the Heart redefines the boundaries of parental authority and sexual love it is considered revolutionary. To Dora Kaplan, Malle fulfills the "most relevant work for the existent artist" by not only reflecting reality but imagining what it might be.⁴⁷ Critics Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder make some reservations in their approval of the film. They fear that the woman can be viewed as just performing another service for a man--son instead of husband. Yet both reviews are highly positive and neither comment on the legitimacy of the incest taboo for genetic purposes.

Dusan Makavejev's WR: The Mysteries of the Organism is given the rating of a "film classic" in the journal.⁴⁸ The film intersperses documentary clips of Wilhelm Reich with a surrealist story meant to dramatize his concepts. It is praised because it finds "sexual repression to be the direct cause of fascism" and hints that the solution to oppression can be achieved through world revolution.⁴⁹ The reviewer does not clarify exactly who the enemy in that revolution is, but seems satisfied that the film deals with political and sexual domination on a broad social basis rather than an individual one.

Les Stances à Sophie, Murmur of the Heart, and WR: The Mysteries of the Organism are commended because one way or another they break away from family and sexual authoritarian power structures where husband dominates wife and both dominate children. To attack that structure is to oppose one method of training people, especially women, to be submissive to authority. Women and Film applauds those few movies which do not so much ask for equality for women, but call for an entirely different social order.

The content of articles which have been discussed reveal the most essential attitudes of the journal. There is the underlying feminism which is more revolutionary than reformist. This initiates a rejection of Hollywood and a fear of being co-opted by System Cinema productions. The main body of critical reviews deal with female stereotyping in its blatant or subtle forms and with the means used to raise feminist consciousness in films sympathetic to women. The norm most often applied in the evaluation of these "women's films" is whether or not women's position (either defeated or alienated) is portrayed as a class problem rather than an individual one. In the last chapter the extent to which political input controls criticism in the journal will be ascertained. Finally, the relationship between aesthetic concerns and political elements in Women and Film will be evaluated.

FEMINIST POLITICS AND FILM CRITICISM

When the editors of Women and Film challenge traditional male-dominated criticism they oppose its concern for aesthetic elements. They denounce these critics because,

At best their works are descriptive and interpretive within the confines of traditional criticism which focus solely on aesthetics and the individualistic values of the middle-class way of life.⁵⁰

The assertion that "traditional criticism" is largely concerned with aesthetics or art in film is valid. When listing the qualifications of the film critic, Lee R. Bobker includes these two: "a thorough knowledge of the art form" and a "belief in film as art."⁵¹ Alternatively, Women and Film advocates the subjection of art to political concerns. The following quotation from the journal, though not written by the editors, summarizes their viewpoint.

In an alienated world, culture obviously is a deformed and deforming product. To overcome this it is necessary to have a culture of and for the revolution, a subversive culture capable of contributing to the downfall of capitalist (sexist) society. In the specific case of the cinema--art of the masses par excellence--its transformation from mere entertainment into an active means of dealienation is imperative.⁵²

There is, then, a dichotomy. The critic who views film as art is concerned with form and content and style. He may find fault with the ideas presented or may dismiss the form, but he is dealing with the expression of individuals. And, except in the broadest sense, those individuals do not consistently work

on a political level. He sees the film as a separate entity and can discuss it without immersing it in social or political struggle. This is not to say he ignores the social and political context of films. A writer who would do that, according to Film Quarterly editor Ernest Callenbach, "we should indeed dismiss as an irresponsible critic."⁵³ Yet most film criticism does not limit itself to that one criterion of analysis.

Neither does Women and Film; but it does primarily concentrate on film as propaganda or potential propaganda. Form, content and style must be subjected to political scrutiny. It must be asked whether or not a film develops the "correct" ideology. In this case the ideology is feminist-Marxist. The general theory is not new. Myron Lounsberry says that in the twenties and thirties film as propaganda was the basic assumption in the many works of critics Harry Alan Potamkin and Robert Stebbins and the latter writings of Experimental Cinema.⁵⁴

To say that film is treated only as propaganda does overstate the Women and Film position. Certainly, many contributors do not apply Marxist standards in their reviews, nor are all films analyzed for their radical content. Yet there is, on the part of the editors, an implicit and sometimes explicit preoccupation with film as communicator of social values which is opposed to the emphasis on individual expression exhibited in "traditional modes of film criticism."

In her article "Feminist Film Criticism: Theory and Practice," Julia Lesage says that feminist critics must be aware of the milieu in which the filmmaker operates. Thus, analysis of a movie must take into consideration the economic base of production and distribution and the ideological superstructure of which the movie is a part. According to her, feminist criticism should also deal with the audience milieu--that is, by attacking sexism it can change the way readers look at their own existence.⁵⁵ When following Lesage's theory the critic subjugates descriptive and interpretive considerations to the social and political motivations and ramifications of the film. Because these aspects are so important she advises the feminist critic to clarify her brand of feminism for her readers.

It is only when the critic writes with her politics up front that the readers can respond in kind and make a political critique of both the film and the review.⁵⁶

The Lesage article is a response to the editor's call for a theory of feminist film criticism. It reflects the methods of many Women and Film contributors and, especially, the criticism of the journal when analyzed as a whole.

Unless one accepts the need for revolution on all fronts, this critical concept leads to certain distortions. One is the neglect of a large number of popular films. After the first two issues the magazine does not follow the advice offered by one of its writers to "find out what is happening in

the drive-ins across the country."⁵⁷ However, the rejection of American commercial productions may not be a serious problem. Other reviewers do contribute feminist critiques of popular films in popular journals. Although one may disagree with Silber's reasons for rejecting Hollywood discussed in Chapter 2, a single magazine cannot be expected to evaluate every film produced. It is certainly valid for a periodical to concentrate on introducing films barely known in the American market.

There is also a hint of the application of a double standard for feminist and nonfeminist productions. Commercial directors are attacked for their characterization of women as prostitutes. The depiction of prostitutes by feminist directors Godard and Kaplan passes without deprecatory comment. Ingmar Bergman's Cries and Whispers is criticized because his detailed female characterizations "merely cover the usual range of types from neurotic to erotic."⁵⁸ Germaine Dullac's The Smiling Madame Beudet (1922) is praised for showing the neurotic dream life of an unhappy housewife.⁵⁹

A more serious problem is that when revolutionary political goals become paramount there develops an inability or unwillingness to judge quality. Strong advocacy of a particular political stance can destroy necessary distance between critic and subject. Of course, many critics and magazines are known for their leanings toward one theory or another. It is when

blatant political input dominates that objectivity suffers.

As part of an effort to further promote a feminist cinema Women and Film gives coverage to women's film festivals and low budget films produced by women. Most of the films in this category are short; many, though made by women, do not have feminist subjects. The reviews are often merely descriptive and rarely negative. Some long films in this group receive special attention because they do treat women's issues and because their production methods meet standards of Collectivism. These are the films produced by that still nebulous group of radical women filmmakers. Women and Film claims to be a part of that group and furthers its causes by promoting and supporting its film ventures.

The Woman's Film, produced by the San Francisco Newsreel, is acclaimed for its focus on working women. It begins with a montage which includes shots of women at various tasks and pictures of models in television commercials and magazines. The film then uses interviews and documentary scenes of the women in consciousness-raising groups. Themes which emerge reveal economic exploitation and beginnings of feminine radicalization. Evident technical problems (out-of-focus shots, jerky zooms) are only mentioned in passing by Mitch Tuckman in his interview with Judy Smith, one of the makers of the film. He is interested in the distribution techniques used by Newsreel (a Marxist group of filmmakers). One of their goals

is to show the films to working people in factory cafeterias in order to make them more aware of their situation.⁶⁰

Another feminist film with a focus on working women, The Point Is to Change It, is also a low-budget documentary produced by a Marxist collective, the Women's Cooperative. Again, the reviewer finds style and form unimportant in comparison with content which centers on the double work load in home and factory taken on by many women, and "correct" production technique which gives full credit to all members of the filmmaking team.⁶¹ (The magazine's attack on the auteur theory, though partially motivated by the dearth of female auteurs, is closely related to this. The editors object to the theory for "making the director a superstar, as if film were a one-man show.")⁶² Both reviews are typical of the coverage of this sort of film.

Siew-Hwa Beh's review of the Chinese film, Red Detachment of Women, shows a similar paucity of objective comment which diminishes her credibility. The main subject of the ballet is Wu Ching-hua, a poor peasant girl who learns to put aside need for personal revenge in order to discipline herself for the battles of the Second Revolutionary War (1927-1937). Beh finds the Chinese Ballet superior to that of Russia, America and Europe partly because of its use of strong, angular motions rather than soft, curved ones. She also favors the subject matter where the women go to war instead of falling in love.⁶³

Beh's review ignores the rigidity of characterization in

this cinema. Joan Mellen, herself a Marxist-feminist, indicates that the purpose of such a film is promotion of the power structure, not increased understanding. She remarks that it is meaningless to discuss the liberated image of women in this film "because there are no people per se presented here."⁶⁴

Mellen's comments reveal important critical elements which Beh has ignored. The fallacy in her criticism and that of the two preceding reviews is that quality and depth of perception are not taken into account.

When the goals of the feminist movement are used to measure all films another distortion arises. A director's personal vision is discounted if he does not further the cause of women's liberation. One review and interview focuses on director Eric Rohmer and his series of films which he calls moral tales (including My Night at Maud's and Chloë in the Afternoon). Beverly Walker concludes that Rohmer depicts liberated women, but they are seen as temptresses who are competing for men against more conventional women. She claims that the most liberated woman loses the man, with the implication that she will not be truly happy.⁶⁵

The director says he is interested in, though not necessarily sympathetic with, the independent woman. He points out that he is attempting to study a man who becomes interested in a woman very different than himself. The fact that the male character stays with the less independent woman is due, Rohmer

says, to their compatibility or to the man following a rule he has imposed upon himself. (In Chloe in the Afternoon Frederick's rule is to be a good husband, so he goes back to his wife instead of to Chloe.)⁶⁶

On the one hand, Women and Film provides quite fair coverage of this matter. Rohmer is given a chance to explain himself. Yet the debate between critic and director points out the tendency of writers in the journal to be so aware of female images that they ignore basic interpretation and study of the total meaning of a film. Rohmer says that the purpose of his tales is to "analyze situations in life." He does not believe that it is his place to fight or defend particular roles.⁶⁷ Yet Walker implies that, despite her respect for him, she expects him to do just that. Criticism need not be limited to judging how well a director does what he sets out to do. By that standard, John Simon points out, if a movie "sets out to be only junk, junk will have to be found excellent."⁶⁸ Yet Walker's implied assumption that Rohmer's films contain basic propagandistic motives diminishes the scope of her criticism.

The interest in whether or not the right kind of woman is seen on the screen leads to another pitfall to which the journal is sometimes subject. By setting up criteria for characterization it is possible to devise formula role models which are hardly less stereotyped than the flapper image was twenty-five years ago. An article by Naome Gilbert reviews films

made by women directors which portray strong, sometimes revolutionary, women. She calls for the making of a new genre which glorifies the female culture heroine. Gilbert seems to want the development of a certain kind of female character--one who is self-reliant and competitive.⁶⁹

Another example of this tendency is the fact that the magazine rarely, if ever, concerns itself with portrayals of happily married women. It is as if this is not a possible role for women. To ask for the development of a new myth of the totally independent woman instead of the weak (married) one is potentially damaging to the variety and truth of film expression. However, many contributors are aware of this difficulty and Julia Lesage warns against the "danger in raising the strong-female role model to the level of prescription."⁷⁰

Film criticism should stimulate dialogue about the worth of a given work. Such judgements need to be based on the historical and contemporary social context of the film and appreciation for creative insights and technical skills. Lee Bobker says that effective criticism needs to interpret and evaluate the following: theme, quality of craftsmanship and individual contributions, quality and nature of ideas, and validity of ideas.⁷¹ Underlying this is the persistent recognition of film as art. His statements imply that the critic must make two kinds of judgements. He or she must judge the worth of the ideas in a film--a moral judgement--and its cre-

ative form--an aesthetic judgement. John Simon writes,

Good criticism informs, interprets, and raises the ultimate questions, the unanswerable ones that everyone must try to answer none the less.⁷²

The criticism in Women and Film suffers because of overt politization, often revealed in vague but shrill Marxist rhetoric, which weakens its objective critical perspective. Simultaneously, the journal includes valuable information about little-known works and directors, and provides a feminist perspective which develops legitimate insights into the many movies which are indeed sexist and those few which are not.

Christiane Rochefort, a director with impeccable feminist credentials, says the most a writer can expect is to make people think--"not to change them, but to answer some reflection, some thought they could have already."⁷³ The works in Women and Film are least effective as criticism when they become dedicated to the use of film as a radical feminist subversive tactic. The criticism is most successful when it asks the reader to consider the limited and negative female images in many films and suggests that those films can become more truthful through complete and sensitive characterization of women.

NOTES

- ¹"Overview," Women and Film, 1, No. 1 (1972), 6.
- ²Ibid., p. 6.
- ³"Overview," p. 5.
- ⁴Ibid., p. 3.
- ⁵Ibid., p. 5.
- ⁶Irwin Silber and Bill Nichols, "Confronting the Consciousness Industry: Two Analyses of Women's Role in the Media," Women and Film, 1, No. 1 (1972), 35.
- ⁷"Overview," p. 6.
- ⁸Ibid., p. 3.
- ⁹Ibid., p. 3.
- ¹⁰Christine Mohanna, "A One-Sided Story: Women in the Movies," Women and Film, 1, No. 1 (1972), 8.
- ¹¹Sharon Smith, "The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestions for Future Research," Women and Film, 1, No. 1 (1972), 18.
- ¹²Ibid., p. 15.
- ¹³William Dean Howells, "From Criticism and Fiction," in The Great Critics, 3rd ed., ed. James Harry Smith (New York: Norton's, 1951), p. 904.
- ¹⁴Smith, p. 13.
- ¹⁵Dora Kaplan, "A Woman Looks at the S.F.I.F.F.," Women and Film, 1, No. 1 (1972), 47.
- ¹⁶Mohanna, p. 10.

- ¹⁷Ibid., pp. 7-11.
- ¹⁸Ellen Keneshea, "Sirk: There's Always Tomorrow and Imitation of Life," Women and Film, 1, No. 2 (1972), 55.
- ¹⁹Molly Haskell, From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies (New York: Winston, 1973), pp. 159-160.
- ²⁰Smith, p. 13.
- ²¹Ibid., p. 13.
- ²²Mohanna, p. 12.
- ²³Siew-Hwa Beh, "Reflections on Recent Trends in Hollywood Films," Women and Film, 1, No. 2 (1972), 17.
- ²⁴Ibid., p. 17.
- ²⁵"Overview," p. 5.
- ²⁶Smith, pp. 20-21.
- ²⁷Kaplan, "A Woman Looks. . .," p. 51.
- ²⁸Silber, pp. 35-39.
- ²⁹"A Note From the Editors," Women and Film, 1, Nos. 3 and 4 (1973), 5.
- ³⁰Madison Woman's Media Collective, "Barbara Loden Revisited," Women and Film, 1, Nos. 5 and 6 (1974), 67.
- ³¹Ibid., p. 69.
- ³²Ibid., p. 67.
- ³³Jacoba Atlas, "Beauty/Enigma/Mother: 'Woman in Children of Paradise, Jules and Jim and Alice's Restaurant," Women and Film, 1, Nos. 3 and 4 (1973), 38.

³⁴Beth Sullivan, "Bed and Sofa/Master of the House," Women and Film, 1, No. 1 (1972), 25.

³⁵Marsha Kinder and Beverle Houston, "Woman and Manchild in the Land of Broken Promise: Ken Russell's Savage Messiah and Paul Morrissey's Heat," Women and Film, 1, Nos. 3 and 4 (1973), 38.

³⁶Siew-Hwa Beh, rev. of Sylvia, Fran and Joy, Women and Film, 1, Nos. 5 and 6 (1974), 79.

³⁷Siew-Hwa Beh, rev. of Vivre se Vie, Women and Film, 1, No. 1 (1972), 71-72.

³⁸Chuck Kleinhaus, rev. of Two or Three Things I Know About Her, Women and Film, 1, No. 24 (1973), 71.

³⁹Abigail Child, rev. of The Girls, Women and Film, 1, Nos. 3 and 4 (1973), 73-74.

⁴⁰Brenda Roman, rev. of Dirty Mary, Women and Film, 1, No. 1 (1972), 67.

⁴¹Kay Harris, "Interview with Nelly Kaplan," Women and Film, 1, No. 2 (1972), 34.

⁴²"An Interview with Christiane Rochefort," Women and Film, 1, Nos. 3 and 4 (1973), 6-7.

⁴³Roman, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁴Kaplan, "A Woman Looks. . .," p. 54.

⁴⁵Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder, "Odd Couple: Woman and Manchild in Harold and Maude, Minnie and Moskowitz, Murmur of the Heart," Women and Film, 1, No. 2 (1972), 13.

⁴⁶Kaplan, "A Woman Looks. . .," p. 54.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 64.

- ⁴⁹Ibid., p. 64.
- ⁵⁰"Overview," p. 6.
- ⁵¹Lee R. Bobker, Elements of Film (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), p. 239.
- ⁵²Everywoman, rev. of Les Stances à Sophie, Women and Film, 1, No. 1 (1972), 69.
- ⁵³Ernest Callenbach, "The Critical Question: Another View," Film Quarterly, 14, No. 2 (1960), 2.
- ⁵⁴Myron Lounsberry, Origins of American Film Criticism, 1909-1939, (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1966), p. 485.
- ⁵⁵Julia Lesage, "Feminist Film Criticism: Theory and Practice," Women and Film, 1, Nos. 5 and 6 (1974), 13.
- ⁵⁶Ibid., p. 15.
- ⁵⁷Donnie, "Bondage Series," Women and Film, 1, No. 2 (1972), 61.
- ⁵⁸Constance Penley, rev. of Cries and Whispers, Women and Film, 1, Nos. 3 and 4 (1973), 55.
- ⁵⁹Dora Kaplan, "Selected Short Subjects," Women and Film, 1, No. 2 (1972), 45.
- ⁶⁰Mitch Tuckman, "Interview with Judy Smith/S. F. Newsreel," Women and Film, 1, No. 1 (1972), 30-31.
- ⁶¹Verina Glaessner, rev. of The Point Is to Change It, Women and Film, 1, Nos. 5 and 6 (1974), 76-77.
- ⁶²"Overview," pp. 5-6.
- ⁶³Siew-Hwa Beh, rev. of Red Detachment of Women, Women and Film, 1, No. 1 (1972), 43-45.

⁶⁴Joan Mellen, Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film (New York: Horizon, 1973), pp. 18-19.

⁶⁵Beverly Walker, "Moral Tales: Eric Rohmer Reviewed and Interviewed," Women and Film, 1, Nos. 3 and 4 (1973), 16.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 20.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁶⁸John Simon, Private Screenings (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 6.

⁶⁹Naome Gilbert, "To Be Our Own Muse: The Dialectics of a Culture Heroine," Women and Film, 1, No. 2 (1972), 25-32.

⁷⁰Lesage, p. 16.

⁷¹Bobker, p. 239.

⁷²Simon, p. 4.

⁷³"An Interview with Christiane Rochefort," p. 9.

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