May 68: Feminism and Beyond

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In this paper I will not be suggesting that we are now in a period beyond feminism, a period of "post-feminism," a notion which is currently asserted by the media and becoming popular in public consciousness. Some kind of "post-feminism" might be a possibility only in a post-patriarchy. Instead, my paper will argue for the continuing relevance of feminist theory and praxis to film studies, and for the hope that feminist theory can still inform "the mental machinery" of the cinema, to take a phrase from Christian Metz, by providing a basis to radicalize film texts at the level of production and, perhaps more within its reach as feminist theory becomes more and more pervasive as a pedagogical practice, by providing a basis to radicalize film texts and speculating subjects at the point of consumption or reading.

My hope, if I were to put it another way, would be that the legacy of May '68 would continue to impact the study of film and of other cultural products, that questions asked in May '68 and after, such as "Who creates? For whom?" and "Who profits from the production of cultural products?" would continue to be asked in the reading and producing of films. The relations these questions prioritized in 1968-69 were those between class and cultural production. Though these relations had been of crucial importance to Marxist formalists in Russia in the twenties, the leftist groups in the May '68 Movement were reiterating them to question traditional Marxism and its debates on radical aesthetics. Using the Althusserian notion that cultural products are sites of struggle between different and sometimes conflicting ideologies in a society, they argue against the traditional Marxist notion that cultural products simply reflect their historical moment.

But since I repeat those questions in the context of May '68's legacy on feminist film theory, I must acknowledge that when they were first posed, gender was not given priority either in the asking or in the answering. It is perhaps well known that many of the women involved in leftist and radical movements in both the United States and France formed separatist women's groups from a growing realization that, as Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron argue, "the vast majority of their male comrades were as deeply phal-locratic as the bourgeois enemy." It is also perhaps well-known that these women suffered verbal and sometimes even physical abuse when they tried to put women's oppression on the leftist agenda for radical change, and that the groups these women formed were for the most part in challenge to the already existing moderate women's groups working for change within the existing order.

It is perhaps less well-known that British feminist Juliet Mitchell had used Althusserian concepts as early as 1966 to critique socialism and Marxism for their inadequacy in theoretically (as well as practically) solving the problem of women's oppression. Mitchell's article, called "Women: The Longest Revolution," appeared perhaps not so coincidentally in the New Left Review the same year as Peter Wollen and Robin Wood debated in that journal over whether Godard was an auteur subject to historical processes and to a system of structural relationships beyond the individual's control or was an auteur with a unique and personal vision. The issues in the Wood-Wollen debate were evidence of the growing influence of structuralism in cultural studies, which would be radicalized as class struggle more assertively extended into the cultural sphere during and after the events of May '68 in France.

Mitchell's article does not appear to have had the direct impact on feminist film studies as did articles like Wollen's and Wood's or the Cahiers' Young Mr. Lincoln essay, but in the years following its publication Mitchell's was widely reprinted by and for women's groups. This was so because like de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, it linked women's oppression with myth. But it also linked solving women's oppression to theory, and appropriated for feminism a materialist discourse that was not theorized from a feminist perspective to critique traditional patriarchal discourses and to show the gap between women's social/political/economic reality and an image of woman as natural. Mitchell was not reading film texts in her analysis, but she was reading images circulating in culture that "spoke" for women.

To read images of women in capitalist patriarchal societies from a feminist context largely means to re-read images of women as
stereotypes. That kind of reading and the subsequent activity of replacing stereotypes with images of women as real, social subjects were and are tasks central to the women's movement and to feminist film theory, criticism, and filmmaking. Very simply, this kind of re-reading asks the questions we started out with—"who creates? For whom? and Who profits from the production of cultural products?"—but from a feminist perspective, one that reads in the gap between what patriarchy has labeled woman to be and what real, social women experience in their material reality.

Feminist film criticism in the United States in the early 70's, most prominently in the journal *Women and Film* and in such books as Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape* and Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus*, was committed to detailed descriptions of images of women in film. Haskell and Rosen looked at the classical American and European narrative film. Their works, in an effort to redress the inequality of women in patriarchy and in filmic images, argued for a de-emphasizing of women's difference from men and for a valorization of certain actresses, like Katherine Hepburn, as models for "stronger" women. The criticism in the journal *Women and Film* and later in *Jump Cut* championed films made by women, especially documentaries made by and for women in the women's movement. These documentaries, which resemble feminist consciousness-raising sessions in their use of women's voices, in the narrativization of women's realization of their position in patriarchal society, and in closures in which women are empowered by such knowledge, show women of various age, race, class, and sexual preference in their specific social context. These films and the criticism which analyzed them and brought them to public attention were important at that time in supporting feminism's embrace of other social struggles, such as those of class and race. I have suggested that the radical groups of this period did not successfully address women's oppression; the women's movement, feminist theory, and feminist films recognized early in their practices the responsibility to address (or at least to try to address) the needs of women of all ages, races, and sexual preference, thereby extending the social agenda of the May '68 Movement.

These films and criticism were also important in expanding the definition of independent film because they envisioned film and criticism as organizing tools for mass action and change. With such a conception came a change in traditional, hierarchical means of production, distribution, and exhibition for these films, thus providing models for other oppositional or alternative cinema. The works of Haskell and Rosen and of those who wrote studies of long, forgotten women directors in the American and European film industries were important for their challenge to the traditional film canons already established in the relatively new academic discipline of film studies. By submitting film "classics" to standards other than those of formal unity or of technological perfection, and by expanding film canons to include those films by women directors and those genres addressed to the female spectator, this early American feminist film criticism helped re-locate film practices and film history in a number of struggles and histories.

But to claim these efforts as attempts to radicalize film texts at the level of production and at the level of reading, and therefore to claim them as the legacy of May '68, is to do so largely ignoring the theoretical contexts for the May debates on cultural production. That is, these early efforts in feminist film criticism rarely analyzed the images of women in film or the position of women auteurs within the structuralist or post-structuralist contexts, contexts which Juliet Mitchell had argued within in 1966 and again in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1974), and which characterized the challenge May '68 debates on cultural production posed to traditional Marxist aesthetics and notions of ideology, to Freudian analysis of narrative content, and to liberal, humanist philosophy and its validation of realism.

Under the influence of structuralism and the post-structuralist synthesis of psychoanalysis, Marxism, and semiotics in film theory at this time, the responsibility of meaning production was shifted away from authors and onto spectators, and the notion that realist film was a window on the world was thoroughly questioned. The cinema began to be seen as a system of rep-
resentation within the larger structure of bourgeois capitalism that not only duplicates the subject’s notion that she or he is unified and the origin of consciousness and specularity, but which also implicates the spectator in just that kind of imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence. That is, the bourgeois, classical cinema is one process in the reproduction of bourgeois individuals. Central to these notions was that myth works in film to transmit and transform bourgeois ideology and renders it invisible.

In “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema,” written in 1973, British feminist Claire Johnston uses this concept of myth to describe how sexist ideology is transformed and transmitted in classical film. Johnston’s theory, like the “images of women” criticism previously discussed, was proffered in the hope of radicalizing the reading of film texts and their production, though Johnston rejects both the “sociological” analysis of woman in the cinema and realist cinema, because

...this would involve acceptance of the apparent natural denotation of the sign and would involve a denial of myth in operation...If we view the image of woman as sign within the sexist ideology, we see that the portrayal of woman is merely one item subject to the law of verisimilitude, (that which determines the impression of realism) in the cinema is precisely responsible for the repression of the image of women as woman and the celebration of her non-existence.5

Though Johnston’s remarks suggest an aggressive attack on the classical film and its pleasures, the notions of pleasure and female desire as well as an investigation and deconstruction of the language of dominant cinema, are central to her delineation of a counter cinema. In her view, the entertainment film has successfully released collective fantasies; now it must do so specifically for women. For a model of how ideology can be subverted in film texts, Johnston looks to those classical films by women directors in which women’s discourse breaks through the gaps in the patriarchal discourse. This symptomatic reading of classical film texts, owing much to the Freudian notions of over-determination and displacement, and to the Althusserian concept of structuring absences, was indebted to the theoretical position in the post-May ’68 Cahiers du Cinema.

The Cahiers du Cinema’s reading of John Ford’s Young Mr. Lincoln, published in 1970, was premised on an active reader and on a text which had a de-centered relationship to its historical context. As a symptomatic reading of that text, the Cahiers tried to uncover cracks in the film’s system, particularly in the disjunctures between various codes, and “make them say what they have to say within what they leave unsaid.” Such a symptomatic reading can be done on those texts in which “an internal criticism is taking place which cracks the film apart at the seams.” This kind of film, first outlined in 1969 in the Cahiers by Jean-Luc Commolli and Jean Narboni, was recuperated as a “progressive text.” Johnston consciously aligns her notion of counter cinema with this new, post May ’68 redefinition of film criticism, appropriating for feminist theory ideas not originally written in a feminist context.

In terms of recognizability, Johnston’s work has probably been eclipsed in the United States by the work of Laura Mulvey, another British feminist writing within the same leftist intellectual milieu as Johnston and Mitchell, and whose work is also indebted to post-structuralist theory in general and to post ’68 film theory in particular. But Johnston’s work was highly influential in shifting the debate within feminist film theory and criticism from a belief that ‘real’ women could be unproblematically represented in cinema, to a questioning of the status of the ‘real’ itself. Her Notes on Women’s Cinema, in which “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema” appeared, was especially important for the Camera Obscura collective, a group of American feminists who originally worked on Women and Film, but left in late 1974 to make, in their words, “a very focused theoretical contribution from a feminist and socialist perspective,” which would study how depictions of social reality are mediated in film, a signifying mode with its own specific structures and determinations. In issue
3/4 of the group’s journal, Janet Bergstrom outlined how Johnston’s work alone and with Pam Cook laid the groundwork for many areas important to the collective’s research:

Though an insistence on a theoretical rather than a sociological approach to feminist filmmaking and criticism, a recognition of the importance of feminist criticism and theory for feminist filmmaking, an emphasis on the importance of an understanding of how the representation of women operates in classical narrative film, rather than the casual and wholesale dismissal of Hollywood films from consideration, the connections made between language, discourse and the working through of the women’s desire, the introduction of topics within feminist theory such as woman as sign, the relationship between woman, representation and fetishism, the rejection of the idealistic notion that a political film had to reject pleasure.

Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” first presented in 1973 and published in 1975, was a pivotal argument for the work of most of her feminist film contemporaries, including the work of the Camera Obscura collective, and it continues to be pivotal for current feminist film theories and criticism. Like Johnston, Mulvey uses psychoanalysis as a tool to expose the ideological implications of classical Hollywood cinema and she theorizes a women’s counter cinema based on the deconstruction of the codes of classical cinema. In describing how woman is not represented in classical film as woman, but only as non-male, she offers here a theory of the cinematic apparatus and spectator positioning that makes the very point of articulation of identification for spectators anchored in an image of the female body which is always, ultimately, the mother’s body. And in accepting the Lacanian re-reading of Freud, the implication here is that the mother’s body, because it signifies castration or lack, can be distanced from the male subject, act as his mirror and insure the coherence of his vision, and therefore his subjectivity. Woman guarantees the primacy and coherence of male vision because she is not like him, outside him, and to insure the continuance of this relationship, the regimes of the classical cinema are based on a controlling male gaze and camera movement and the male character as agency of narrative action. Mulvey’s argument was much more controversial than Johnston’s because it suggested, with little chance of escape, that the position offered to the spectator by this regime is the position of the male, and for women spectators to derive the pleasure this cinema offers, they must be positioned as male. With the issue of female pleasure at stake, Mulvey argues that the pleasure that this cinema offers must be destroyed through a counter cinema which will deconstruct the codes which makes the patriarchal ideology invisible.

Soon after its publication, Mulvey’s argument was critiqued for theorizing just the male spectator position (leaving the only possibilities for the female position as either identification with the sadistic male gaze or with a masochistic submission to this gaze), for identifying the pleasure offered by classical cinema as politically incorrect for women, and for offering few suggestions on how a counter cinema could be pleasurable. Most feminist film theory written “post-Mulvey” has been in some kind of response to those criticisms.

Very early in their history, the Camera Obscura collective acknowledged their debt to Johnston and Mulvey, but turned to the textual-analysis work of Thierry Knutzell, Raymond Belour, and Stephen Heath to more clearly account for the specificity of cinema’s signifying material and textual systems, and hopefully to help delineate the activity of spectatorial positions beyond the dichotomy of male/female. The work of Belour et al continues to provide the basis for close textual analysis of films from both within and without a feminist perspective, but Bellour’s theory is premised on a notion of woman as grounding and obstacle for narrative in the classical system, with the female spectator’s position (once again) constructed in terms of masochism or sadism.

Teresa De Lauretis critiques the notion of narrative as “trans-cultural and trans-historical, that it ‘is simply there, like life itself’,” and exposes the male Oedipal mechanism at work.
in “the very epistemological basis of structuralism and cultural semiotics.” The Oedipal drive of narrative, with woman as obstacle and prize is understood by De Lauretis - as by Mulvey - as the way sexual difference is mapped into each cultural text, but De Lauretis argues that gendered positions are not stable and therefore women/female spectators have to be “seduced” into “femininity,” into “woman.” She suggests that Eco’s theories on the mapping of social vision onto subjectivity could re-open the debate on how cinema works to insure women will be seduced into the feminine place assigned to them within its regimes. In other words, she argues for a theory of spectatorship that would examine the relationship between the psychic subject and the historical subject. As a counter cinema, De Lauretis argues for a cinema that is Oedipal with a vengeance, one that will expose cinema’s duplicity with Oedipal narrative and the female subject’s place within it.

In her work on the Von Sternberg/Dietrich films, Gaylyn Studlar argues for a psychoanalytic model of spectatorship that is freed from issues of castration, sexual difference, and feminine lack because it is based on a masochist aesthetic in which the subject submits to the powerful gaze of the mother. Although this theory suggests that the spectator might simultaneously desire and identify with the opposite sex, promises to theorize spectatorial positions beyond the dichotomy of male/female, and sees the image of woman as evoking more than a sadistic response, it is unclear if the insistence on yet another phallic mother in film theory is strategically effective for feminist goals: if the phallic mother here appeals to the pleasure of infantile, pre-genital experience, how do we account for the fact that spectators going to the cinema are at that point gendered, social subjects constituted in a patriarchal society? And this being the case, how can the subject’s “submission” to a phallic mother (a maternal space of dread) escape status as yet another patriarchal maneuver of the maternal?

Finally, the work of Mary Ann Doane on the problematic of the female body and film and on narrative and gaze strategies of the women’s film perhaps most fully explores the implications of Mulvey’s argument for feminist goals. In “Women’s Stake: Filming the Female Body,” Doane argues that because feminist film theory has denied the neutrality of the cinematic apparatus, has denied that reality equals that which we can see, and has denied that sexuality/gender necessarily equals the physical, it has led to an impasse in which the conceptualization or representation of the female body in theory and filmmaking practice is not even attempted. In this context, in the realization that feminist cinema could have a political stake in representation of the female body, Doane acknowledges the attractiveness of Irigaray’s attempt to provide women with “an autonomous symbolic representation”, one suggested by the autoerotic pleasure possibly inherent in the morphology of female anatomy. But believing that a “nostalgic return to an unwritten body” is impossible, Doane praises those feminist films like Riddles of the Sphinx (1976), Thriller (1979), and Jeanne Dielmann (1975) which construct “a syntax which constitutes the female body as a term.”

In her work on the women’s film, Doane explores the implications of Mulvey’s argument for female spectators. Within the paradigm of psychoanalysis, film theory can only reassert that woman is the mirror, the image, the object of desire, and it is only through a repression of this body/place which she has to occupy that it can be symbolized. In this context, Doane asks how classical cinema deals with a contradictory ideological project of addressing female spectators such as in the women’s film, and argues that because the “women’s film insistently and sometimes obsessively attempts to trace the contours of female subjectivity and desire within the traditional forms and conventions of Hollywood narrative - forms which cannot sustain such an exploration - certain contradictions within patriarchal ideology become more apparent.” In this work, Doane is advocating a reading of the women’s film that will radicalize the texts, or rather, the reader at the level of reception. This might happen because the text displays symptoms of ideological stress, but her argument is premised on the fact or hope that real, social female subjects will resist the place inscribed for the female psychic subject inscribed in the text.
 Hopefully this reading will work to “facilitate the production of a desiring subjectivity for the woman - in another cinematic practice.”12 Doane’s insistence on this happening in “another cinematic practice” is evidence of some of her work's limitations, because when she actually describes the female spectator of the classical women’s film, she returns, “obsessively” herself, to an insistence on the masochism of the female subject that these texts inscribe, while leaving behind the female, social subject that either never or, at least, was less and less coinciding with this inscription at that historical moment. In other words, in the analyses of the texts, Doane forecloses the possibility of their radicalization at the level of consumption.

Except for Studlar’s work, all of the feminist theories working within psychoanalysis I’ve mentioned here have somehow suggested or even been based on the notion that a thorough examination of how subjectivity is formed in capitalist patriarchal culture and how cinema is implicated in subject formation is crucial to delineating a counter cinema. According to the argument I have been developing here, I think this fact suggests the sympathy between these theories and the goals of feminism/the goals for cinema suggested by the May ’68 debates on cultural practices.

What needs to be asked, and has been asked, especially by feminist critics writing in the journal Jump Cut, is how adequate are psychoanalytically informed feminist theories to explain non-dominant cinema? and especially, how adequate are they to explain determinations of race and class, and to describe readings oppositional to those that may be inscribed within the text? These questions have been often asked by lesbian feminist film critics who argue that psychoanalytically informed theory and criticism cannot explain oppositional readings informed by the contradictions experienced by lesbian social subjects in a heterosexual culture. Also, they suggest that the psychoanalytic readings that have been made of some films, like Dance, Girl Dance (1940), cannot even explain the lesbian positions inscribed within the text itself.

Meanwhile, it seems as though colleagues and students increasingly express that their interaction with certain theoretical constructs, such as psychoanalysis, leave them feeling powerless. I think perhaps this can happen when theories haven’t adequately addressed the relationship between psychic subjects inscribed in texts and the real, social subjects who experience those texts. This issue could be discussed in terms of “relevance,” a key catchword in the 60’s. Theories are useful to the degree to which they make the relationship between subjectivity and social experience relevant. I don’t think we should kill the messenger because it brings us bad news, that we should throw out psychoanalysis because it has described the formation of male subjectivity and accounts for the consequent victimization of women with so much zeal or that it inadequately describes female subjectivity. Women as real, social subjects can and do resist such inscriptions of victimizations, and they do so in ways that are sometimes specific to their class, race, age and sexual preference. The women’s movement was and has been able to empower because it links the personal/subjectivity and the political, the basis on which we act as social subjects towards other social subjects. Feminist film theories of spectatorship must take this relationship between psychic subject and social sub-

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ject, between oppression and resistance, into account.

A "cultural studies" theoretical model of spectator-text relationships provides for readings oppositional to the encoding of messages by the dominant culture, and it might be a valuable alternative to psychoanalytic theories because it combines empirical studies with theories of subjectivity and ideology in trying to account for a psychic subject with a historical, social reality. But I think it is important to take into account that negotiations of meaning between spectator and text may not always take place in an equal exchange. Repudiating "hypodermic needle" theories of popular culture, Tania Modleski has attempted to validate some of the pleasures offered to women as real, social subjects by popular culture, specifically by soap operas, but she has argued that these pleasures can be co-opted by the patriarchy, that the basis for women's self-recognition in these texts co-exists with the hegemonic work of containing this potentially empowering self-recognition. As long as the patriarchal culture controls the means of film and television and other media production, the degree to which women can negotiate their own pleasurable readings is mitigated at best.

To look towards the next twenty years: we are now, we are told, in the age of post-modernist theory, which has declared there is no center and implies there are no margins. Even though a primary goal of feminism has been to demarginalize women, as long as we are in the margins, we have a political stake in saying so. Twenty years after May '68, women are still oppressed in image, theory, and social reality—maybe we should also ask now, "who creates theory? and for whom?"

5 Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," reprinted in Bill Nichols, Movies and Methods, (Berkeley: University of Calif. Press, 1976)
6 Cahiers du Cinema Editors, "John Ford's Young Mr. Lincoln," reprinted in Bill Nichols, Movies and Methods, see op. cit.
7 Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni,"Cinema/ Ideology/Criticism," reprinted in Bill Nichols, Movies and Methods, see op. cit.
8 Janet Bergstrom, "Rereading the Work of Claire Johnston," Camera Obscura (no. 3-4, Summer 1979), p.25.
10 Ibid., p.12
14 At the "May '68: Twenty Years Later" conference, Marsha Kinder discussed this issue in terms of its implications for Third World Filmmakers.