

Introduction

This book has been prompted by my conviction that the present landscape of feminism and film has been deprived of its own history, substituting a canon of texts for a set of lived experiences long since forgotten, shelved, or denied by those who went through them. For veterans of the early years of the seventies, this void has diminished the sense of accomplishment and importance achieved in that period and has undermined the sense of self-worth that ought to have infused the intervening decades with pride of contribution. For the younger generations that have come of age in the academy over the past two decades, this historical amnesia has canceled out a birthright that would have been helpful in terms of avoiding the repetition of certain errors, learning how to negotiate across difference, and reconciling the personal with the professional—if not always the political. For filmmakers, recalling the past can suggest remedies for the market excesses of the present, even a sense of relief that it wasn't always so.

My subject here is cinefeminism, a term that was sometimes used to describe the broad field of feminism and film that began in the seventies with the flourishing of film festivals and the simultaneous invention of theoretical approaches to classic Hollywood representations of women, eventually expanding to other films as well. It's a discipline that began as a movement, drawing its strength from the political breakthroughs of the

women's liberation movement as well as from the intellectual and ideological lessons of the New Left. On the film front, it was fed by the energies of the Nouvelle Vague, Czech New Wave, New Latin American Cinema, and, closer to home, by the activist Newsreel collectives. Some people followed Jean-Luc Godard, some Maya Deren, some Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino. On the theoretical front, the operative names were Louis Althusser, Umberto Eco, Christian Metz, and Charles Propp, with Chairman Mao and Julio Garcia Espinosa as alternative models.

Over the decades, of course, cinefeminism evolved into something rather different—feminist film theory—with theoretical legitimacy, currency, and prestige. It was one singular contribution that set in motion the sea change of realignment: the appearance in *Screen* magazine in the autumn of 1975 of an article by Laura Mulvey entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” The thousands of subsequent articles that footnoted Mulvey soon constituted a veritable cottage industry and effectively transformed the nature of the field, once so varied, into one concerned with the controlling power of the male gaze, the fetishization of the female body, and the collusion of narrative cinema with gender subjugation. One of my aims here is to recover a sense of the field before it was entirely captivated by textual analysis, theoreticism, and academic concerns; before it was recuperated into a range of specializations that today often prevent the open communication among women that once had been possible and enriching; before psychoanalysis achieved analytical dominance as the only approach of value; before nostalgia and amnesia competed in our minds to trivialize or ignore a terrain that had inexplicably vanished from history.

Because this volume doubles as a tracking of my own intellectual and personal concerns during a lengthy history, it also encompasses my attempts to interrogate changing interests and shifts in popular culture. I have a method to my madness, and it's called autobiography—certainly not the most obvious or natural choice, but for me the only one possible. Perhaps it's understandable. To house a selection of ephemeral pieces spanning more than a decade in one volume may appear adequate enough reason to undertake publication, at the very least saving people the trouble of hoarding old Xeroxes; not so. For me, a quixotically utopian attempt to recapture history is the only mission that makes this project relevant, or even necessary: I'm driven by the desire to situate these pieces within the historical context of their time, to tease out the thread of circumstance and polemic that gave rise to them in the first place. I want to recapture an era's long-forgotten intellectual trajectories and struggles and try to read them back through the convex reflecting mirror of the present. Only an autobiographical frame could contain what I have to say.

I believe in the utility of memory and the need to learn from history,

but there's something else at stake, too: a reminder that the person and the text are linked. I believe it's important for us to understand the kind of evolutionary processes that gave rise to some of the early feminist film texts and the kind of laboratory of speculation within which we were working. Lives, friendships, and quarrels all inform the development of intellectual thought, despite the way in which intellectual histories tend to obscure such connections. It's a shame, really. Bloomsbury Britain, Weimar Germany, Paris *avant la guerre*, Mexico between the wars, Shanghai in the twenties: these fabled sites should not be the only monuments to creative synergy among individuals, ideas, art, and politics. Autobiography has an intrinsic connection to history, just as anecdote does to analysis. All of our lives count: it's all history, if only we remember.

I have labored in the fields of film and video for twenty-five years of my life in one capacity or another, some of which I attempt to chronicle in the pages that follow. Knowledge can be acquired and exhibited in a variety of ways. To read and then to write: that's the standard intellectual route. In the years of my own formation, though, there were many other options. Journals and journeys, conferences and conversations, partying and politicking, going to movies and going to bed. I spent the seventies in Chicago; my friends and colleagues may not have fit the fantasy scene of expatriates living the high life on the Left Bank, but we did conduct our lives with a glamor and style of our own invention, in community if not always in concert, and we developed our ideas hand in hand with our lived experience. As a critic and a film exhibitor, I tried to get audiences for the work I believed in and to combat insularity. I wanted them to understand why they should be interested in the work I was championing and what was at stake in its structures or ideas or images that was relevant to their lives and our shared times.

I was engaged in a process of reinvention of my self in the world, as well, moving from living with a man to living with a woman, functioning as a curator and later as a critic, learning to lecture and teach and, above all, learning the difficult female lesson of how to internalize authority to command respect in the world. It was the era of women's studies departments being founded, histories being recovered, new languages and customs developed, and I was very much in sync with the era.

There was, at that moment and in that place, a constructed sense of shared film culture. It wasn't exactly concrete, but neither am I imagining things. During the writing of this text, I had occasion to spend time in Chicago once again, and found myself constantly encountering individuals whose lives had been marked by that time, stimulated and changed and enriched, and who testify still to its cultural realness.

In the eighties, battle lines shifted and so did lifestyles. Much was

gained and much was lost. I left Chicago for New York City on the cusp of the changes: New Year's Day 1981. The kind of feminist world I'd inhabited became less coherent, more effervescent perhaps: it was everywhere, or nowhere. The political world I'd already explored in a long trip through Latin America and a subsequent trip to Cuba, through community-based screenings in Chicago's barrio, and by working on "solidarity" committees changed, too; I kept traveling to Cuba and Latin America, but increasingly I went as a professional committed to cultural exchange and scholarly research.

My interests soon focused on the emerging independent feature sector, institutional politics, popular culture, and the interrelation of works of representation and belief systems. I moved from film exhibition to criticism, theory, administration and funding, teaching, lecturing, always searching for that magical magnetic connection that originally drew me in: the connection between self and public, between idea and practice, between the individual and the social, the ideological and the marketable. To use my favorite subway metaphor, I've always liked the energy of the third rail, which is indispensable to locomotion, not despite but precisely because of its dangerous power. When I began to work as a bureaucrat in a system of public funding, I was able to harness power to my version of the public good, even as all such potential began to diminish under the assault on culture by ravaged state economies and underemployed cold warriors eager for new targets. The New York State Council on the Arts, where I served throughout the eighties, was a beacon of light in the cultural darkness, thanks in no small part to its "Chairman" Kitty Carlisle Hart. Whether funding films by Yvonne Rainer or Sheila McLaughlin, channeling distribution funds to Women Make Movies, or encouraging prestigious venues to show more films made by women and people of color in general, the service occupation of public philanthropy didn't always seem as far away from the old world of upstart polemicist as it might have.

In the nineties, I moved between New York and San Francisco and rededicated myself to writing, lecturing, radio commentary, and even teaching. Popular culture has occupied me more than ever in my capacity as a popular journalist, whether on public radio or the masthead of *Elle* magazine. My field of vision has become more generous. I find myself more willing to accept difference, not just in a theoretical argument but in the countless minor negotiations of daily life in the culture industry. I sincerely believe that the people who read *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (the academic journal where I have edited film and video reviews) and the people who mob the Sundance Film Festival (where I serve on the selection committee) have something to say to each other. I truly believe

that my friends in Mexico City, New York, Columbus, London, and San Francisco have as many commonalities as differences.

At the same time, the striking echoes that show up in today's cultural debates like misplaced detritus of long-past disputes and discoveries have restimulated my desire to reexamine the past. What was uncovered in the world of feminism and film in the seventies, and what was buried? I'm convinced that the texts, events, players, and films of this earlier time can now be differently constructed by nineties' eyes, and I find myself encouraged by the newly insurgent unorthodoxies of a new generation of junior faculty, graduate students, and even the undergraduates that I sometimes teach. In part, the new irreverence is a product of changing academic styles owing a debt to cultural studies and postmodernism. But I think it's equally a legacy of the riot grrrl revolution and its willingness to reclaim some of the terrain that feminism lost in the eighties and early nineties. May film, then, learn from music how to stake out brand-new terrain boldly while gaining, not losing, audience. Negotiations over representation and spectator position can now be reopened with vigor, just as the boundaries can be pushed wider past the limit of the text and its analysis, pushing on to the necessary historical work waiting in the wings and perhaps even the empirical studies that could carry today's theory so much further along than mere glosses on established theoretical positions.

There's a serious need for such reconsiderations. Feminist cultural work has hit an impasse in the nineties, as has a great deal of feminist political work in general. What sprang up in the seventies and was institutionalized in the eighties has been stagnating in the nineties, its vigor bypassed by queer culture, on the one hand, multiculturalism on the other, and cultural studies in general. In countless conversations, a shared malaise has surfaced. Feminist film work has been bypassed by newer intellectual land grabs, paralyzed by the dead ends of its own development, sidelined when it's desperately in need of renovation and revival. (Even the AIDS quilt, after all, gets media attention and financial support that the feminist reclaiming of quilts back in the seventies could never have dared to imagine.) It is my intention that this volume expose enough unexplored routes and forgotten byways of feminist film history, as originally explored by myself and others, that new explorations by a new generation might perhaps jumpstart a feminist film culture, revitalized and retrofit for nineties uses. Also, as the veterans of these experiments and struggles age, it's more important than ever to acknowledge their contributions and valorize the nerve and will that made their interventions possible. Many of the early pioneers are today demoralized or cut off from the film world entirely, yet it's thanks to them that the feminist film world

of today—in Hollywood, independent production, or the academy—has been made possible.

In reconstructing my memories and formulating my recollections of this past through which I've lived, there's been a temptation to see every moment as a zeitgeist in the making and to give the impression that my every movement was magically touched by an elixir of historical importance. In truth, any number of women who lived through these times could spin out entirely different narratives in which they appear as central players. And we'd all be right. They were exciting times.

That's part of the reason. In truth, though, I suspect that I blundered into historical moments less regularly than I had the nerve to insist that the events that I was experiencing were in themselves, well, momentous. Everyone can play this game, and everyone should. We'd benefit by the contribution of disparate narratives that could explain a great deal about historical process and about how individual lives intersect with historical movements, both subjectively and materially. The film world could use more histories of the sort that the literary world has always inspired, just as feminism will benefit from more personal narratives of the kind that have long chronicled the Beat movement and the New Left.

Consider these pages, then, an opportunity to revisit a past that's recent enough to be remembered and long gone enough to be memorable. I offer up my own writings and ramblings through the world of feminism and film with the idea that there's something of value here. Though I'd like to think that my original essays can stand the test of time, more pertinently I believe they'll gain much in clarity and implication from their location in this web of personal reflection and tales of origin. Equally important is my wish that the link between the personal and the public, between the woman and her text, be acknowledged. For it is only if such links are rearticulated and reenlisted as a necessary mode of cultural production that feminist writing can reclaim the high ground at a time of increasingly professionalized, parochial, self-absorbed, and deracinated writing.