



***Camera Obscura* at Thirty: Archiving the Past, Imagining the Future**

A man of about thirty strikes us as a youthful, somewhat unformed individual. . . . A woman of the same age, however, often frightens us by her psychical rigidity and unchangeability. . . . It is as though, indeed, the difficult development to femininity had exhausted the possibilities of the person concerned.

—Sigmund Freud, “Femininity”

The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. Many people . . . hold . . . that such a change of sex is against nature. . . . It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since.

—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

Camera Obscura turns thirty in 2006. The editors eschewed, or neglected, marking twenty-five, a somewhat unformed age, in favor of the celebration of a moment of remarkable potential—perhaps radical changeability, as Woolf, if not Freud, would have it. To celebrate the journal’s birthday—it is, after all, an independent

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entity of sorts and deserves a party, and one which is as inclusive as possible (unlike most anniversary celebrations, even silver ones)—we have begun to collect short writings that we have called an archive for the future of “feminism, culture, and media.” A number of these contributions are included in this issue, and they will continue to run throughout the three issues published during the anniversary year. As current editors of the journal, we see our introduction to the archives as a forum to reflect on its history, theory, and practice, to revisit our past, and to look toward the future. *Forum* might seem like an odd word to use here, since this is, after all, a published document and not a meeting. The editorial collective of *Camera Obscura* is made up of members spread out across North America, as well as across the various sub-disciplines of film, media, and cultural studies. Yet despite—or because of—these differences, we do meet: both literally, in the “confabs” we hold, and metaphorically, in our shared intellectual curiosity, theoretical goals, and political investments. Thus while lively discussions and debates often ensue at our meetings, a unity holds the collective and the journal together. And while the unity of the collective has shifted throughout the years—with the various comings and goings of members—we celebrate the journal’s thirty years and the efforts of past collectives, looking forward to our future work.

In the introduction to this anniversary volume that follows, our unity and our differences are equally apparent. Each section is written by one of our editors, and together, they interact and intertwine.¹ At times, the observations interrupt one another; at other times, they continue a thought. The organization is modeled after a collectively written piece titled “Feminism and Film: Critical Approaches” that appeared in the first issue of the journal.² The original statement by the collective used the following section headings: “Context,” “Text,” “Methodology,” “Production.” We liked the simplicity of those titles, but we have added to them more descriptive subtitles and altered their original arrangement in order to narrate the journal’s history and its approach over the years. In this way, the idealistic and prescriptive nature of the origi-

nal piece is transformed into the retrospective—though still idealistic—bent of this current essay. Similar points inevitably emerge, yet each contribution gives specific emphases to select topics, calling attention to particular aspects of our theory and practice.

The first section, for example, calls attention to the journal's institutional history—or, perhaps more accurately, its anti-institutional history. Related to that is the history of the journal's editorial collective, and so the second section considers the complicated practice of collectivity that has defined not only the journal's operation but also its political orientation. There are some aspects of that orientation that have remained constant over the journal's history, most notably, a commitment to feminist theory and practice. Yet as the third section elaborates, other aspects have shifted: no longer just interested in the question of sexual difference as originally formulated, *Camera Obscura* is also now interested in questions of difference more broadly defined, equally invested in analyses of race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, gender expression, and generation as it is in analyses of gender. Further, in addition to broadening its political and theoretical scope to encompass such concerns, *Camera Obscura* has also enlarged the scope of the texts it addresses, moving beyond a consideration of cinema alone to other media formations and institutions (television, music, photography, medical imaging, digital productions, and so on), both in relation to and in distinction from those of film. However, despite these changes and the varied political, theoretical, and textual commitments that they represent, there is something that has always held (and continues to hold) the journal together: an ongoing intellectual verve and the epistemological excitement of active cultural engagement, both of which initiated the *Camera Obscura* project and continue to fuel the journal today. The last section of the essay thus attempts to capture some of the flavor of this energy and to clarify how it has both directed and redirected the journal over the course of its history.

All of these issues, of course, overlap; the sections therefore overlap as well. In perhaps classic *Camera Obscura* fashion, this is a truly self-reflexive piece: one in which the current editors reflect

on their own and the journal's concerns, one in which the various contributions reflect one another, and one that, we hope, reflects the theory and practice, intellectual and political engagements, personal and professional motivations that define our work. Such reflexivity is an intrinsic part of that work: it undergirds both *what* we do (producing a text that situates and critically comments on other cultural texts that themselves can be read as commenting on our cultural situation) and *how* we do it (processing such critique through our editorial practice of collective processing itself). Our approach to this history and overview has thus been personal, anecdotal, collective, individual, even sometimes contentious. It is a kind of living history that is as much about the present work of collectivity as it is about the founding of the journal and its original aims thirty years ago. We believe that it therefore not only describes but itself enacts the way in which *Camera Obscura* operates.

Context: A Brief History

Camera Obscura emerged as a collective feminist response to a paradoxical tension between the presence of the image of women on screen in mainstream film and the absence of women in both the fields of mainstream film production and the emerging disciplinary production of film theory. Issues of the representation of women in film were central to the journal's original project, foregrounded by an emphasis on alternative women's production and on psychoanalytic and ideological inquiries into commercial and avant-garde cinema.

The journal was founded by four women just beginning graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley: Janet Bergstrom, Sandy Flitterman, Elisabeth Lyon, and Constance Penley. They met while working on the magazine *Women and Film*, which had moved from Los Angeles in 1973 to be somewhat informally housed in the Pacific Film Archive. The four left *Women and Film* after two years because they wanted to engage with theoretical issues that were beyond the scope of the magazine and to experiment with the ideals of collective work. The first issue of *Camera Obscura* was published in 1976, featuring discussions of Jackie

Raynal's *Deux Foies* (France, 1968), the work of Yvonne Rainer, and Jean-Louis Baudry's theory of the cinematographic apparatus. Subsequent issues were produced sporadically for three years, at which point they largely regularized at three issues per annum. Some key essays in those early issues of *Camera Obscura* were collectively written, and the production of the journal was also collectively engineered. Members of the editorial group sought and received small amounts of funding through UC Berkeley and the city of Berkeley for the first four issues. By the fifth issue, *Camera Obscura* was partially funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which was renewed for almost two decades. The high level of design and production values was enabled by the large number of graphic artists and fine arts printing facilities in the Bay Area, many of them also receiving crucial support from the NEA.

In its later years, the universities affiliated with the editors have supported the journal in large and small ways, either through minor grants or through housing the journal. These institutions include the University of Rochester's Susan B. Anthony Center (1985–1990) and, since 1991, UC Santa Barbara's Department of Film Studies. After ten years of do-it-yourself publishing, the move to the University of Rochester provided the journal with its first non-P.O. box address. This move also coincided with a subsidy (from Johns Hopkins University Press) to publish the journal. *Camera Obscura* would later be published by Indiana University Press (1992–2000) and now by Duke University Press (as of 2000). These varied institutional affiliations mark the ways in which *Camera Obscura* has been tied to the broader development of film studies in colleges and universities, yet they have also allowed relative independence for its collective members and its production of ideas. They further display how the journal is a collective enterprise, not just in the makeup of its editorial board but also in the ways it brings multiple organizations and institutions together (such as the various home universities of its editors, as well as the NEA). Of course the latter is true of most academic journals, but in the case of *Camera Obscura*, every element of its production is sparked by the collective action of its changing cast of editorial members.³

Indeed, given its philosophical as well as material condi-

tion as a collective enterprise, *Camera Obscura* has been actively formed by its editorial members as individuals and as a body of feminists working together. An important theoretical scope of the journal—its commitment to continental philosophies like psychoanalysis, semiotics, and apparatus theory—was influenced by the journal’s original editors who studied abroad in France with teachers like Christian Metz and Raymond Bellour. These theorists themselves were early contributors to the journal, and so *Camera Obscura*—alongside other journals, such as *Screen* in particular—became an early leader in the larger turn toward continental theories in the evolution of film studies in the 1970s. Psychoanalysis functioned as a tool of interpretation for many *Camera Obscura* authors as this approach provided a model for rigorous textual analysis to consider the intricate workings of gender relations and the concomitant oppression of women as manifest symptomatically in film.

This same form of analysis was an intimate part of women’s alternative production, something also emphasized in the journal. As noted, the first issue of the journal showcased films by Jackie Raynal and Yvonne Rainer;⁴ the second included work on films by Chantal Akerman, Marguerite Duras, and Babette Mangolte;⁵ the double third-and-fourth issue included an essay on Dorothy Arzner’s *Christopher Strong* (US, 1933);⁶ and the fifth contained work on Sally Potter.⁷ Alongside this attention to women’s filmmaking practices, the second issue of the journal inaugurated a section titled “Women Working,” which highlighted ongoing work by women theorists and historians, as well as women by artists and activists. In this capacity, *Camera Obscura* early on documented such projects as *The Legend of Maya Deren* (which sought to collect all writings by pioneer avant-garde filmmaker Deren), published brief reviews of new work by a range of feminist filmmakers, and included reports on feminist conferences. Hence “Women Working” offered an expansive definition of feminist work in film, combining creative and intellectual, cinematic and written production.

Camera Obscura was also known through its presence in other critical spaces, which helped to underscore its theoretical and collective project. For instance, as the feminist journal was

emerging, the board members Constance Penley and Janet Bergstrom, identified as members of the *Camera Obscura* editorial collective, contributed an essay to *Screen* (1978).⁸ This contribution revealed something of a shared position between the journals, however contentious debates about theoretical production were in *Screen* during this time.⁹ It also pointed to the complementary projects under way in *Camera Obscura* between psychoanalytic/semiotic analysis and women's filmmaking practices, as well as to the tensions and contestations between these projects within the journal itself. These tensions were largely borne out through the deep textual analysis that became the journal's signature style. As the editors described it in detailing critical approaches in the first volume of the journal, "Textual analysis considers the text (the film) as a dynamic process of the production of meanings, inscribed within the larger context of social relations. The text is seen not as a closed work, but as a discourse, a play of signification, dynamism and contradiction. This definition of text displaces the spectator as fixed receiver of meaning; and implies an unfixing and unsettling of the spectator-screen relationship."¹⁰

This early and historical pronouncement of a commitment to seeing the text—and, surely, this would ultimately include the theoretical text as well as the filmic one—as a dynamic process is repeatedly enacted in the ensuing history of the journal as it seeks new texts and new textual approaches, the latter of which are often borne of moving-image media. While the journal's original context "evolved from the recognition of a need for theoretical study of film in this country from a feminist and socialist perspective" (3), these goals remain current not only in the face of the threat of so-called postfeminism (a sense that our work has already been done) but also in the continually expanding space of feminist inquiry, especially in those efforts to make that space broader and more inclusive.

Production: A Collective Fate

Those of us who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s know that the range of possible fates for collectives is limited. These unwieldy

organizations strain with tensions that can easily tip their fragile balances. A collective can implode, reducing its size to a tiny kernel that threatens total collapse; it can explode, either by reciprocal purging or by expanding so far that it loses all shape. Or, the collective can mutate as the comings and goings of members redefine the group. In the case of *Camera Obscura*, of course, we have been dealing with two overlapping entities: the editorial collective and the journal itself. For all but one of the current editors (Constance Penley, who was part of the original collective), discovering *Camera Obscura* in a library, bookstore, classroom, or friend's office had a distinct impact on our professional direction and development. Before we knew the members of the collective, or understood the editorial practice, we were readers excited by this forum who aspired to place our work there. Indeed, the journal seemed to us to be carving out exactly the terrain that we hoped to inhabit as scholars in film, media, and feminism. So *Camera Obscura* made our work possible before we were recruited to make its work possible. And just as we were drawn to the journal through our own evolving networks of identification—professional and personal—so a shifting collective identification has continued to reshape the journal's project.

Surely the biggest force haunting collectives and collective work is temporality, both in the sense of history—it is a way of organizing work that many consider anachronistic—and in the sense of time consumed in the collective process. But equally important, in *Camera Obscura's* case, is that its collective has persisted for nearly thirty years, while its membership has undergone numerous shifts. While members have departed and arrived one by one, the evolving collective has taken a palimpsest form as the editors embody the journal's various historical stages. Each new editor helps to reshape and reanimate the group. As a result, *Camera Obscura's* culture allows for continuity that accommodates differences.

Camera Obscura's current shape is intimately tied to its history. Founded as a feminist collective in the 1970s, it remains marked by the legacies of both the feminism of the period (this includes the perhaps dated practice of consciousness raising) and

the basics of left political organizing. The journal also profited incalculably from the cultural shift that women were effecting within the university: more women were completing PhDs and producing scholarship in the area of feminism, film, and media studies. The journal participated in this shift as the founding collective took as part of its mission to encourage emerging feminist academics by providing a venue for their work. Its members also mentored these new scholars, some of whom went on to join the editorial group. Of course, the strongest mark of the journal's history has been its commitment to a collective editorial structure and process.

Most important to the journal's success has been the collective's commitment to lively and unbridled debate. As it launched its project, the journal participated enthusiastically, even aggressively, in the fierce contests that shaped the emerging fields of film studies and women's studies in the US academy—along with the field of literary studies, from which many of the original editors had migrated. *Camera Obscura* made its early marks in the field polemically, and its contentious nature resonated at the level of collective work. In contrast to many feminist enterprises of the period, *Camera Obscura* embraced dissent and contention. In our view, its commitment to thorough and vigorous debate leading to consensus has been its greatest strength, though this commitment has not been without casualties. This intellectually and often emotionally challenging process has proven too time-consuming or demanding for some editors. And, surely, at times, we have achieved consensus on a political or theoretical point at the cost of leaving other issues out of account. For example, looking over our history, it becomes clear that the early centrality of theorizing sexual difference left little room for consideration of homo-/heterosexual differences, or of other compelling social differences. That central commitment, of course, gave way—not without struggle—as the collective's perspective shifted both through its changing members and in the context of ongoing debates in the field. Not least among the casualties of our process may also have been our publication schedule, whose historical irregularities stemmed in no small part from the cumbersome process of arriving at consensus on any given issue.

At the same time, however, the insistence that serious intellectual exchange and discussion of political concerns must underlie both our editorial process and the shaping of each particular volume has given *Camera Obscura* the sharpness of profile that it maintains to this day. That is, while the journal reworks its theoretical and methodological commitments as the collective's membership evolves to represent new issues, approaches, and expertise, it continues striving to identify new intellectual currents and to intervene in ongoing debates.

Because *Camera Obscura* began as a feminist collective without any regular institutional support or endorsement, it has maintained an unusual degree of independence. Relative autonomy from institutions, departments, and professional organizations has significantly favored the collective organization. Indeed, many institutions would not have supported a journal that lacked (or refused) a hierarchical editorial structure. Only in 1985, with the journal now by any standard mature, did it find an institutional home at the University of Rochester when Constance Penley joined that institution's English department and film studies program. Still, we have consistently chosen to distribute labor and decision making across the group and its diffuse geographies, preferring not to consolidate either authority or accountability in a single editor or place. This means, of course, that we work largely without the kind of individual credit that any one academic institution might reward, but it also means that the editorial process must provide its own internal satisfactions.

Primary among these satisfactions is regular intellectual exchange. But equally important to us and to our mission is the sense that contributors expect us to experiment and take risks. Moreover, functioning as a collective has allowed us to perform all of the primary review processes ourselves, without using outside referees (although advisory editors are frequently consulted). While we have taken criticism for this policy from some of the membership of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), it has allowed us to stay very close to developments in the field and has permitted us to keep the journal on a course that we continually renew without the policing of disciplinary or field-specific

boundaries. Rather, the content of the journal more closely reflects the concerns of the collective and its readership, since this policy has kept us in close dialogue with one another and with our authors. Because at least two editors read every submission, and because the whole collective discusses acceptances and revisions, the commentary the author receives includes her or him in our conversation. This admittedly labor-intensive editorial process has produced some significant effects: it has allowed us to identify and promote the work of younger, emerging scholars, and it has generated a loyal readership eager to contribute their mature work to our pages while encouraging their students to submit some of their first scholarship to the journal. Thus the editorial process has generated a scholarly community.

Our collective operates not by any exact calculation or completely equal distribution of labor or participation; rather, it allows us all some flexibility in organizing our working lives. This means that we take turns shouldering a little extra work, providing the final push we need to conclude a project, or assuming responsibility for the all-important timekeeping that holds us to schedule. But the trade-off is that no one person provides the primary leadership or bears the primary burdens of an editor in chief. In short, we carry on through a sense of mutual responsibility to both the journal and the collective. And this is how *Camera Obscura* maintains some continuity of profile and practice across the differences introduced by changes in the collective. As the membership has evolved from the original collective, invariably attracting feminist scholars for whom the journal provided a formative influence, we find that our work is sustained by a shared—and perhaps idealized—vision of the journal and by shared aspirations for its future, which depend on identifications both with the collective and with *Camera Obscura* itself.

Texts: Broadening the Scope

Camera Obscura was introduced with the subtitle “A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory.” As that title indicated, the journal focused on film as its object of analysis, using—and originat-

ing—new approaches in feminist, cultural, and critical theory to rethink cinema, as well as, notably, using cinema to rethink feminism and critical theory. In particular, *Camera Obscura* was interested in the ways in which the film spectator is positioned and addressed by cinema's visual and narrative strategies. The journal thus became known for its rigorous deployment of semiotic and psychoanalytic theories of textuality and the subject as it attempted to produce both a systematic description of film's modes of representation and an interrogation of the phantasmatic and ideological implications of the cinematic apparatus (especially its enunciation of and implications for relations of sexual difference). The great value of this approach was that it encouraged work that concentrated on the specific operations of cinema (particularly classical Hollywood cinema) and thus on the specific ways in which differences (primarily, at that time, sexual differences) might be constituted and defined—or, in some cases, reconstituted and redefined—through particular cultural apparatuses, including those of film and other popular media. That is, by analyzing the operations of the cinematic apparatus, attending closely to its texts, institutions, and spectator relations, those affiliated with *Camera Obscura* (as editors, mentors, and contributors) emphasized how structures of desire and identification are formed, maintained, and reproduced—structures that are typically operative not only in the cinema but in phallogentric culture as a whole.

In this way, *Camera Obscura* aimed to avoid approaches to cinema that risked presuming the static existence of precisely those identifications, pleasures, and meanings that film and media studies scholars have taken as their objects of analysis.¹¹ Instead of assuming that women, as members of a unified group with certain qualities determined by gender norms, simply have a fixed status in relation to cinema—whether as subjects or objects of vision, as audience members, authors, or as images on screen—*Camera Obscura* attempted to interrogate how categories like those of gender, spectatorship, or spectacle are constructed, how subjects are made to see and to appear in particular (though not essential) sexed positions. Instead of treating popular cinema as a mode of

escape from such social positions (film conceived reductively as a trivial form of entertainment), the journal took seriously the way in which films have significant psychic, social, and ideological effects, how they—and those of us engaged with them—operate within delimited parameters. Instead of assuming that our responses to film are, in some way, our “own,” it considered how larger dynamics of desire and knowledge are inscribed in films and how these engender meanings and pleasures of which we are not fully aware. In other words, *Camera Obscura’s* emphasis on the specificity of cinema helped the journal analyze formations of media and culture in a truly critical way, refusing approaches that might be faulted for being too voluntaristic or naively pluralistic—both a too-easy validation of viewers’ experiences and enjoyments, as well as an overly optimistic faith in filmmakers’ and film critics’ ability simply to make of films what they choose.¹²

Yet while avoiding those problems, the journal arguably risked other pitfalls: some critiques of *Camera Obscura’s* project (including, importantly, self-critiques arising from journal editors and contributors) suggested that in its emphasis on how film’s strategies of representation and enunciation reproduce and reinforce those of phallogocentric culture, *Camera Obscura* overlooked other possibilities for film, media, and culture. Critics claimed that in its attempt to avoid a naive pluralism, the journal tended to disavow the differences that do exist within media culture and our relationships to it—differences inscribed in texts through varying conventions and modes of address, as well as differences elicited in readings by varying intertexts, discourses, and audience engagements. However, charges that *Camera Obscura* promoted a universalizing and monolithic theory of film are belied by a look at the range of its actual contents. From the beginning of the journal’s history, *Camera Obscura* editors and authors were interested in alternatives to the (relatively) closed form of classical Hollywood cinema, and a number of essays that considered texts from other traditions and institutions were published. In particular, as elaborated in other sections of this piece, there was great interest displayed in the work of feminist, independent, and avant-garde filmmakers, with journal authors looking to various countercin-

emas in order to consider how films might undermine classical structures, rework Hollywood's modes of looking and narration, and thus establish other terms of desire and identification—a different spectator-screen dynamic that might then correspond to the different psychic and social dynamics to which the journal was (and continues to be) committed.

There have also long been essays that considered texts other than films. Indeed, the journal's growing interest in a variety of media forms followed from the aforementioned interest in alternatives to Hollywood cinema and in the work of independent artists and producers. Several of those artists and producers (Chantal Akerman, Marguerite Duras, Valie Export, Laura Mulvey, Ulrike Ottinger, Sally Potter, Yvonne Rainer, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, among others) worked not only in film but in other arenas as well (dance, performance, photography, music, video, writing), and that work intersected with their films in intriguing ways, raising questions of multi- and intermedia relations.¹³ And, of course, an interest in the ways in which image and narrative might be differently articulated in the work of different authors, operating with different codes and within different contexts, institutions, and traditions, dovetails with an interest in the ways in which different media forms—even so-called dominant ones—might variously articulate modes of seeing and knowing. Thus, just as many filmmakers were also involved with other media, so were many film scholars. People who were trained in film theory began to consider how that theory applied—or failed to apply—to different media forms, leading to reconsiderations of both their objects and methods of analysis. Given that media forms are themselves often gendered in discourse (i.e., the history of seeing television as a “feminine” form or medical image technology as a “masculine” one), this question of inter- or cross-mediation opened, one might say, a natural area of inquiry for *Camera Obscura*—something discussed, for example, by many contributors to *Camera Obscura's* 1989 survey of work on the spectatrix.¹⁴

The institutional as well as textual links—and, importantly, the institutional and textual disjunctures—between film and other signifying/social formations (medical imaging, televi-

sion, video, performance, urban space, advertising, etc.) therefore became a notable area of exploration for *Camera Obscura*, shifting its concerns from an exclusive focus on film to broader questions of media and culture. For example, in 1988, *Camera Obscura* published its first special issue on television studies, “Television and the Female Consumer,” which included essays on soap operas, melodrama, and so-called new woman genres; television and domestic space; TV stars and fans; and early television’s treatment of class and ethnicity. In addition, it provided guides on television research and archives and reviews of other recent TV scholarship.¹⁵ Next was an issue with the title “Male Trouble” that included a dossier on the configurations of gender, generation, and sexuality in the television program *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*;¹⁶ this was soon followed by an issue titled “Popular Culture and Reception Studies” with essays on, among other things, amusement parks, burlesque, film exhibition in African American communities, rap music, and Elvis.¹⁷ Further indicating *Camera Obscura*’s far-ranging involvement in cultural studies, two special issues titled “Imaging Technologies, Inscribing Science” were produced in 1992, with work covering such topics as x-ray and laser technologies, fetal imaging and reproductive politics, AIDS, breast cancer, cosmetic surgery, constructions of transgender bodies and identities, and health educational and activist video.¹⁸ And many contributors to the special issue “The Spectatrix” in 1989 had indicated their interest in broadening *Camera Obscura*’s traditional focus on the female spectator of film to include considerations of spectators of other technological and media forms, as well as, indeed, other spectators in general—those not necessarily nor solely delimited by binary sexual difference in the way that the phrase *the female spectator* typically implies. These (and other) special issues and dossiers helped both to inaugurate and to demonstrate the developing interests of the journal, positioning it within the fields of visual and media studies quite expansively defined.¹⁹ In that sense, the change in the journal’s subtitle almost two decades after *Camera Obscura*’s introduction—from “A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory” to “Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies”—only made more visible and official the changes that had already taken place (and were

continuing to take place) in *Camera Obscura's* editorial emphases and aims, as well as in the collective itself: the new subtitle first appeared, appropriately, in a 1994–95 special issue titled “Life-time: A Cable Network ‘For Women,’”²⁰ but clearly by that time *Camera Obscura* had already established itself as a journal devoted to the analysis of a wide variety of media texts.

With this move toward a broadly conceived object of analysis came a move toward varied means and methods of analysis. Although *feminism* remained in *Camera Obscura's* subtitle as a primary political and theoretical commitment, the journal expanded its notion of differences beyond a supposedly singular sexual difference to include multiple, overlapping differences (of race, nationality, sexuality, gender expression, age, and so on), suggesting an implicit critique of the unifying tendencies of a narrowly conceived identity politics. Similarly, while semiotic and psychoanalytic theories have retained a place of importance in the journal, other approaches (industrial and historical analyses, genre and star studies, ethnographic and reception models, analyses of race and ethnicity, postcolonial theory and critiques of empire, queer and trans studies, etc.) have also figured significantly in its contents. These approaches have been at times articulated in opposition to and at times in concert with semiotic and psychoanalytic models, indicating the intellectual debates and academic shifts with which the journal has engaged. In this way, *Camera Obscura* has foregrounded and even helped to establish a scholarly interest in moving within and between both disciplinary and identity categories.

As suggested, such changes in the journal go hand in hand with the shift from *film* to *culture and media*.²¹ Just as exploring a range of media texts meant considering how those texts may differ from the terms of classical cinematic ones, considering a range of subjects and categories of difference meant exploring, in various ways, other media that historically have been significant in terms of those differences. That is, though the initial work of *Camera Obscura* suggested that classical film emphasizes structures of binarized sexual difference perhaps best approached through a psychoanalytic lens, other media may bring other issues and methods to the fore: for instance, television's relationship to the domesticated family—and what that family disavows or excludes—may make

sociologically inflected reception models of TV viewing contexts and/or queer-theory models of TV textuality central concerns; likewise, the fraught history of US popular music, urban entertainments, and/or youth subcultures may make approaches that emphasize class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and/or age a particular focus in studies of those formations. As *Camera Obscura* began to consider multiple media formations, it thus, in a reciprocal and mutually dynamic relationship, also began to consider issues, theories, and methodologies beyond the ones it initially emphasized (which is not to say, of course, that those issues and approaches are not equally significant in film studies and that *Camera Obscura* has not also demonstrated a commitment to exploring questions of race and sexuality, for instance, within the cinema itself).

In sum, then, *Camera Obscura's* shift from a journal of feminism and film theory to a site for feminism, culture, and media studies is intimately connected to the other issues under discussion in this essay—the history of the journal, its theoretical and methodological development, its political and intellectual charge, and its basis in a theory and practice of collectivity. Offering not a naive pluralism but, rather, an informed and more radical one, *Camera Obscura's* embrace of work on multiple media and subjects, from multiple perspectives and with multiple concerns, has allowed the journal to continue making an impact in film, media, and cultural studies without losing sight of either its initial vision or its various options for the future. Indeed, in presaging and predicting many aspects of current work in film, media, feminist, and cultural studies (an interest in interdisciplinarity and intermediality, a critique of unified models of both textuality and subjectivity, a concern with media conventions in conjunction with media histories, and an exploration of the ways in which various intertexts, discourses, and identifications intersect), *Camera Obscura* has provided, and will continue to present, a lens through which to view these fields.

Methodology: The *Camera Obscura* Effect

The heady appeal of the early years of *Camera Obscura*—a thrill elicited especially by essays written and signed “the *Camera Obscura* collective”—lay, certainly for an undergraduate becoming infat-

uated with the fields of women's and film studies, in its double affiliation with the women's movement, on the one hand, and with French theory, on the other. The by-now hegemonic but one-time improbable merger between feminism and poststructuralist theory epitomized the identity of the journal, became its cultural and intellectual legacy, and still shades its reputation today. I say "heady appeal" because the journal's passionate feminism pursued affairs of the head much more than of the body: it fought on the academic front of the women's movement. As we have mentioned in this piece, its most enduring liaison was with Paris-centered psychoanalytic and semiotic film theory. The topicality demanded of the journal format seemed to heighten the urgency of the liaison, which also characterized many books of French-inflected feminist theory appearing in the US and Britain during that period—books such as Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction* and Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose's *Feminine Sexuality*, both appearing in 1982. At the same time, by publishing reports on women filmmakers (primarily avant-garde), film distributors, and conferences, *Camera Obscura* maintained close ties with feminist practice, with the groundswell of women's media organizations—production collectives, distributors, and festivals—that sprung up internationally during the 1970s. The journal's feel of militancy was exciting—despite, or because of, serving two mistresses. The French connection made the journal chic; its edge of dogmatism signified rigor in relation to the "crunchy" US women's culture of the time. But without a concurrent culture of women's media activism, reflected in the notes on contemporary activities headed "Women Working" and the short film reviews headed "Matrix," as well as in the ads for such sister publications as *Heresies* and *Jump Cut* and the small feminist distributor Serious Business, the journal's French fizz would have gone flat.

The journal's design, which remained consistent until the end of the twentieth century, balanced its two affiliations to the feminist movement and French theory: a plain white cover, fading to a shade of cream, quite similar to paperbacks from the French publisher Gallimard; a single black-and-white, academy-ratio film image on the front and back covers; the title rendered always in

lowercase. Feminist authenticity and antihierarchical convictions were served by the do-it-yourself, minimalist look and lowercase logo, while the asceticism and suspiciousness of visual pleasure preached in the art and theory of the period was sweetened with just enough fetishism of form. Indeed, the journal's two affiliations were counterpoised—or locked in dialectical tension—in most aspects of the journal. Something about this combination was compelling.

Primary to the seeming contradictions that *Camera Obscura* posed was the status that the journal granted “male theory,” or, simply, men. Unafraid to challenge the bachelor machines of male avant-garde filmmaking and masculinist theorizing, the journal nevertheless gave Christian Metz and Alfred Hitchcock exalted spots in its pantheon alongside such filmmakers as Laura Mulvey and Chantal Akerman. Raymond Bellour and Thierry Kuntzel, male gurus of the Paris Film Program, were also given pride of place in its pages. But the difficult prose, and even the admittedly patriarchal premises, of Lacanian theory only enhanced the journal's aura of rigor, rigor, rigor—apparent most notably in its close textual analyses of experimental feminist work. In *this* venue—translating, editing, framing, even contradicting male-generated ideas (notably Bellour's contention in a conversation with Janet Bergstrom that “I think that a woman can love, accept and give a positive value to [classical Hollywood] films only from her own masochism”)—the sisters were doing it for themselves.²²

It was this extravagant intellectualism, combined with the commitment to the currency and wide relevance represented by the publishing and distribution schedule of a periodical (even if it was not always maintained in practice) and with the always sexy subject matter of film and filmmaking, that made the journal emblematic of the moment of greatest consolidation of feminist film theory in the late 1970s and 1980s. Its American, rather than British or French, provenance probably gave it wider circulation as film studies programs and small bookstores proliferated in the US, and it certainly tinged its polemicism since interdisciplinary women's studies programs frequently resisted male theory in favor of a political orientation built solidly on American pragmatism. As

part of the legacy of its first years, *Camera Obscura* still has passionate defenders and detractors even after its politics, look, subtitle, and collective membership have altered notably. This aura of controversy does not diminish, but probably enhances, the intellectual high in discovering that *Camera Obscura's* so-called dogmatism is a chimera—one that fades on closer inspection of its contents, as previous sections of this essay have illustrated. It is true that the journal, in conjunction with important writings in the late 1970s and early 1980s by such scholars as Annette Kuhn, E. Ann Kaplan, Teresa de Lauretis, Pam Cook, and Claire Johnston, helped establish a canon of feminist films and filmmakers that excluded most straight documentary and narrative films and included few women of color, the experimental documentarian Trinh T. Minh-ha as a notable exception. But it is important to note that *Camera Obscura's* influence coincided, and in part defined, a moment in feminist film culture in which a symbiotic relationship existed between production, distribution, exhibition, and theory. Work by independent women filmmakers, including women of color, mushroomed in the mid-1980s (see, for example, the enormous growth of Women Make Movies, the single US independent feminist distributor that survived the decade), and mainstream successes increased as well. There were more films than one journal could cover. Yet features of the journal in its current manifestation—including the revival of the “Women Working” section—attest to the crucial role of this interdependence of theory and practice in “cinefeminism.”

Another paradox alluded to above is *Camera Obscura's* emblematic identification with the sexual-difference paradigm of spectatorship—that is, with a psychoanalytic discourse that is heteronormative, ahistorical, and abstract. An early kinship between the journal and the British journal *m/f* (whose psychoanalytically informed Marxism is profiled in *Camera Obscura* 3/4) made a significant impact on Constance Penley's 1988 edited volume *Feminism and Film Theory*, which defines the field of its title almost exclusively in terms of psychoanalytic approaches to sexual difference.²³ Tania Modleski and Teresa de Lauretis, two eminent feminist film scholars critical of the orthodoxies of sexual difference, did not participate in *Camera Obscura's* survey of the field, the special issue titled “The Spectatrix,” perhaps feeling that the terrain was

not neutral. Yet in contradiction to the perception of the journal's straight mind, not only have a significant number of queer women served as members of the editorial collective since the 1980s but *Camera Obscura* has also published lesbian film theory extensively in more recent years. The inclusion of queer perspectives also opened the editorial offices and, for a time, the collective itself to male participation; gay men also joined straight male feminists on the advisory board. Concurrently, psychoanalysis, while engaged by many in the journal's pages, ceased to function as a master—or master's—discourse. Instead, it was wielded as part of queer theory or combined with, even contested by, other methodologies. In a context in which feminist criticism was being challenged to take on multiple axes of analysis, the critique of race and racism became a central concern of the editors and contributors, and the race-blind manner in which psychoanalysis had so often been used contributed to that discourse's loss of authority. Finally, as cinema yielded its dominance as the object of study in the pages of the journal as in the field at large, cultural studies methodologies allowed lived social differences of race, class, nation, sexuality, and gender expression to become tangibly addressed.

The journal's shifts in emphasis are illustrated by the books that *Camera Obscura* has issued. Volumes based on special issues on masculinity, television, and science and technology coincide with a long stretch of the journal's history in which all but Constance Penley from the original collective moved on to other things and passionate new members (some of them still among us) came on board. The turn to history, which many commentators on the academic discipline of film studies saw as the “next big thing” after psychoanalytic feminism, is well represented in the journal, as well as in the first *Camera Obscura* book to appear from the journal's current publisher, Duke University Press—*A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, edited by Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra. If we take the move to Duke University Press as marking the beginning of the journal's current period, we must also situate this as a retrospective period. On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of *Camera Obscura*, two planned volumes include a collection of essays representing the journal's substantive engagement with race and representation, as well as a *Camera Obscura* reader whose selection

of essays distills some of the energies, orthodoxies, and intellectual adventures traced in this piece.

Today we are in many ways far away from the seemingly unified editorial point of view represented in those early issues of the journal. A diversity of topics, methods, and approaches, particularly as these are fostered in an emphasis on emerging scholars, is characteristic of the current period. But in other ways, the journal remains consistent with its origins: *Camera Obscura* is passionate about ideas, about film, and about its sister media. And its editors are just utopian—or perhaps arrogant?—enough once again to sign the current contribution:

—The *Camera Obscura* collective

Notes

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1. Sections of this essay were written by Amelie Hastie, Lynne Joyrich, Patricia White, and Sharon Willis; the complete piece was revised by them collectively.
2. *Camera Obscura* collective, “Feminism and Film: Critical Approaches,” *Camera Obscura*, no. 1 (1976): 3–10.
3. Past and current editors include Janet Bergstrom, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, Elisabeth Lyon, Constance Penley, Margaret Ganahl, Grace Barnes, Lea Jacobs, Maria LaPlace, Denise Mann, Candace Reckinger, Linda Reisman, Janet Walker, Lynn Spigel, Sharon Willis, Julie D’Acci, Sasha Torres, Lynne Joyrich, Phillip Brian Harper, Patricia White, and Amelie Hastie. Past and current managing editors include Nina Leibman, Mary Carbine, Gary Laderman, Rachel Adams, Russell E. Coon, Jeanne Scheper, Emily Davis, Andrea Fontenot, and Molly Moloney.
4. From *Camera Obscura*, no. 1 (1976), see *Camera Obscura* collective, “An Interrogation of the Cinematic Sign: Jackie Raynal’s *Deux Fois*,” 11–26; *Camera Obscura* collective, “*Deux Fois*: Shot Commentary, Shot Chart, Photogramme,” 27–51; *Camera Obscura* collective, “Yvonne Rainer: Interview,” 76–96; and Janet Bergstrom, “Yvonne Rainer: Introduction,” 53–70.

5. From *Camera Obscura*, no. 2 (1977), see Janet Bergstrom, "Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles," 114–21; Elisabeth Lyon, "La Femme du Gange," 122–29; and Constance Penley, "What Maisie Knew," 130–36.
6. Jacqueline Suter, "Feminine Discourse in *Christopher Strong*," *Camera Obscura*, nos. 3–4 (1979): 135–50.
7. From *Camera Obscura*, no. 5 (1980), see Jane Weinstock, "She Who Laughs First Laughs Last," 100–110; and Sally Potter, "Sally Potter on *Thriller*," 99.
8. Constance Penley and Janet Bergstrom (for the *Camera Obscura* collective), "The Avant-Garde: Histories and Theories," *Screen* 19 (1978): 113–28.
9. See, for instance, the summer issue of *Screen* 17 (1976). This issue has a contribution titled "Why We Have Resigned from the Board of *Screen*" by Edward Buscombe, Christine Gledhill, Alan Lovell, and Christopher Williams. The authors include three theses supporting their decision to resign: (1) "*Screen* is unnecessarily obscure and inaccessible"; (2) "the politico-cultural analysis that has increasingly come to underpin *Screen*'s whole theoretical effort is intellectually unsound and unproductive"; and (3) "*Screen* has no serious interest in educational matters" (110–16). The remaining board members responded at length to these charges in this same issue.
10. *Camera Obscura* collective, "Feminism and Film," 5.
11. Specifically, *Camera Obscura* attempted to go beyond the limitations of the images-of-women approach that was extremely common at the time of the founding of the journal, providing the basis for numerous courses on women and film, for educational films that attempted to counter media stereotypes, and for books such as Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973) and Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies, and the American Dream* (New York: Avon Books, 1973). These early attempts to engage with the representation of women in film were certainly important and, indeed, often more complex than typically acknowledged. However, as the phrase *images of women* suggests, such work tended to presume a fixed content to both images and women. In its most reductive formulations, it thus risked implying that a film's meaning, defined through its

content, is easily readable and that women, defined as a group, share certain traits indicative of an essential identity, such that one need only compare the two—film content and women’s reality—in order to determine the implications of the portrayal.

12. This, for instance, might be said of a certain kind of cultural studies work that applauds audiences for their resistant readings of texts without always carefully considering the ways in which such apparent resistance might itself be inscribed within, exploited, and/or recuperated by dominant media and consumer industries.
13. In addition to their film work, both Yvonne Rainer and Sally Potter have also worked in dance and choreography; Ulrike Ottinger has worked in photography; Laura Mulvey and Marguerite Duras are, of course, authors in addition to filmmakers; and Valie Export and Chantal Akerman have each worked in video.
14. Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane, eds., “The Spectatrix,” special issue, *Camera Obscura*, nos. 20–21 (1989). Not only is the question of the applicability of film theory to other media forms such as television raised in the issue’s introduction (Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane, “The Female Spectator: Contexts and Directions,” esp. 14–15, 21) but numerous contributors, detailing their own histories and interests as scholars, also discuss this question in regard to a wide range of media and practices (television, video, performance, music and youth subcultures, pornography and sexual subcultures, fan communities, women’s writing and reading, etc.). See, for example, the contributions by Jacqueline Bobo, Giuliana Bruno, Charlotte Brunson, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, Mary Beth Haralovich, Christine Holmlund, Lynne Joyrich, E. Ann Kaplan, Marsha Kinder, Annette Kuhn, Julia Lesage, Gina Marchetti, Judith Mayne, Patricia Mellencamp, Meaghan Morris, Margaret Morse, Constance Penley, Ellen Seiter, Lynn Spigel, Lesley Stern, and Chris Straayer. Significantly, two of these contributors—Sandy Flitterman-Lewis and Constance Penley—were members of *Camera Obscura*’s founding group; their broadening interests thus stand as an interesting testament to the widening interests of the journal as a whole. The same might be said of many of *Camera Obscura*’s later editors (such as Lynn Spigel, Denise Mann, Julie D’Acci, Sasha Torres, and Lynne Joyrich), who are as (if not more) known for their work on texts

other than cinematic ones than for work within the discipline of film studies proper.

15. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, eds., "Television and the Female Consumer," special issue, *Camera Obscura*, no. 16 (1988).
16. Constance Penley and Sharon Willis, eds., "Male Trouble," special issue, *Camera Obscura*, no. 17 (1988).
17. Lynn Spigel, ed., "Popular Culture and Reception Studies," special issue, *Camera Obscura*, no. 23 (1990).
18. Paula A. Treichler and Lisa Cartwright, eds., "Imaging Technologies, Inscribing Science," special issue, *Camera Obscura*, no. 28 (1992); and Paula A. Treichler and Lisa Cartwright, eds., "Imaging Technologies, Inscribing Science 2," special issue, *Camera Obscura*, no. 29 (1992).
19. *Camera Obscura's* shift from film to media, as indicated by the examples given in the text above, both reflected and helped to solidify a similar shift in the discipline as a whole, and work in other journals also marked this general disciplinary expansion. For instance, *Screen* early on published work on television, doing a special issue on independent cinema and British TV, and then a special issue on TV more broadly in 1980 and 1981; see *Screen* 21 (1980) and *Screen* 22 (1981), esp. no. 4, "Television Issue." Even earlier than that—in 1978, between its volumes 6 and 7—the *Journal of Popular Film* became the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. And an early interest in video in other forums (for instance, in the journal *Afterimage*) also signaled work in the field that attempted to define moving-image media in various ways, rather than just through film.
20. Julie D'Acci, ed., "Lifetime: A Cable Network 'For Women,'" special issue, *Camera Obscura*, nos. 33–34 (1994–95).
21. Indeed, many of the essays reflecting changes in the journal's theoretical, methodological, and political commitments appeared in precisely those previously noted special issues that also made clear its changing textual focus.
22. Janet Bergstrom, "Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis: Interview with Raymond Bellour," *Camera Obscura*, nos. 3–4 (1979): 97.
23. Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988).