I love the duality of props, or objects. . . . Also the duality of the body: the body as a moving, thinking, decision- and action-making entity and the body as an inert entity, object-like. Active-passive, despairing-motivated, autonomous-dependent. Analogously, the object can only symbolize these polarities. . . . Yet oddly, the body can become object-like; the human being can be treated as an object, dealt with as an entity without feeling or desire.

—Yvonne Rainer, 1970 (emphasis added)

Dance is ipso facto about me . . . whereas the area of the emotions must necessarily directly concern both of us. This is what allowed me permission to start manipulating what at first seemed like blatantly personal and private material . . . such things as rage, terror, desire, conflict et al., are not unique to my experience the way my body and its functioning are. I now—as a consequence—feel much more connected to my audience, and that gives me great comfort.

—Yvonne Rainer, 1973

From the body as unfeeling object to the comfort of shared emotions, and from her 1960s work as a Minimalist dancer-choreographer to her turn in the 1970s to filmmaking, these two statements distill the contrasting poles of Yvonne Rainer’s oeuvre. The first, written in relation to her semi-improvisational dance Continuous Project—Altered Daily (1970), is nonetheless recognizable as a central dynamic of her work throughout the 1960s. It speaks of the coexistence of polarities, or, as Rainer repeatedly states, the duality of object/subject,

* I am grateful to Hal Foster, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, and Yvonne Rainer for offering corrections, suggestions, and critical insights.
active/passive, and autonomous/dependent. In the second, part of a letter to Nan Piene written following a screening of her first feature-length film, *Lives of Performers (A Melodrama)* (1972), the language of oppositions has been displaced by a turn to emotion, to feelings, as the basis for a potential social collectivity. Against the necessary separation of the dancer and her audience, we see in Rainer’s shift into film—the more mediated art form—a new sense of commonality. The psychological bond that emotion allows contrasts with and is set wholly apart from the phenomenological experience of the (individual) body in motion. This is not the “merely personal,” as Rainer put it, in response to Jonas Mekas’s valorization of the subjective aspects of her film; rather, Rainer’s “personal” can be understood in light of the renowned feminist slogan “The personal is the political.”

If *Lives of Performers* poses the question of emotion for Rainer (and note that the above quotation comes from a letter written *after* a screening, when Rainer had become part of the audience), the political potential of feelings is developed most fully in her next feature film, a work that makes sexual difference its very subject: *Film About a Woman Who . . .* (1974). I am not quite arguing for Rainer as a feminist artist, an appellation that she resisted until at least 1976; instead, keeping her ambivalence in mind, I am trying to grasp a more general cultural turn brought about by the women’s movement. Forever squeezed between the “long 1960s” and the emergence of postmodernism, New York in the 1970s has received little art-historical attention. We need only review the literature related to the so-called Pictures Generation, which typically locates the critical roots for these Reagan-era artists in unfinished debates from the 1960s, skipping over 1970s practices altogether. Rather than treating feminist practices as a separate art-historical narrative or seeing the women’s movement as asserting a vague and generalized impact on the cultural realm, this analysis locates a shift at the level of


aesthetic form—a emergent political aesthetic—in the work of an exemplary figure of the Minimalist 1960s. Paying particular attention to the figuration of sexual difference, Rainer’s *Film About a Woman Who . . .* provides us with a sense of the lived “structures of feeling,” to use Raymond Williams’s phrase, that gave shape to this overlooked decade.\(^5\) This will require considerable attention to the problem posed by *feeling*—a particularly denigrated term in the cultural discourse of the 1960s—before I return to a close reading of the sexual politics of *Film About a Woman Who . . .*.

**Structure/Feeling**

The critical reception of *Film About a Woman Who . . .* tends to emphasize the very opposition that Williams displaces: structure versus feeling. The former term, typically connected to structuralist film, refers to Rainer’s debt to the reflexive strategies of filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton and Michael Snow. In *Film About a Woman Who . . .*, an experiment with form converges with “autobiography (especially as it is emblematic of woman’s experience).”\(^6\) Or, as Annette Michelson writes, *Film About a Woman Who . . .* is “[f]illed with private and not-so-private problems and agonies,” but, she goes on to say, “the film’s structure proposes, far more interestingly, the uses of such material, how they can be distanced, the extraction of the formal potential of these constraints and ambiguities.”\(^7\) In Michelson’s analysis, the personal, the emotional, and the private are critically reframed and *distanced*, to evoke a ubiquitous Brechtian term, by Rainer’s engagement with the formal structure of the medium. Feeling is associated with subject or theme and differentiated from the formal strategies of the medium, the film form. Feeling versus structure, personal content versus formal distance: The framing oppositions of this critical discourse had become particularly significant during the early-to-mid-1970s, and were already embroiled with questions of gender. This issue is distilled by Carolee Schneemann, a New York art-world contemporary of Rainer’s, in the satirical script for her 1975 performance *Interior Scroll*. The text synthesizes the opposition between structure and feeling into a gendered antagonism that uses film as an important reference, an anchor, one might say, for the masculine half of the binary. In the most memorable segment of the performance, Schneemann removes an elongated scroll from her vagina and reads the following portion of the script as it unfurls.

I met a happy man/a structuralist film maker—but don’t call me that/it’s something else I do—he said we are fond of you/you are


\(^7\) Annette Michelson, “Yvonne Rainer, Part Two: ‘Lives of Performers,’ ” *Artforum* 12, no. 6 (February 1974), p. 32.
charming but don’t ask us/to look at your films we cannot/there are certain films we cannot look at/the personal clutter the persistence of feelings/the hand-touch sensibility the diaristic indulgence/the painterly mess the dense gestalt/he said you can do as I do take one clear process/follow its strictest implications intellectually/establish a system of permutations establish/their visual set/my work has no meaning beyond/the logic of its systems I have done away with/emotion, intuition, inspiration—those aggrandized habits which/set artists apart from ordinary people.⁸

With the reference to “painterly mess” and “those aggrandized habits,” the aesthetic values associated with feeling in Schneemann’s text remain bound up with Abstract Expressionism. The legacy of this earlier generation still loomed large as feminism began to question the gendering of emotion and reclaim it as a realm of collective, politicized experience. Moreover, despite the neat rhetorical oppositions evident in the text—body/emotion/female versus logic/intellect/male—the structuralist filmmaker, Schneemann has since revealed, was modeled not on a man, nor in fact on a fellow artist, but rather on Michelson, the aforementioned critic, a writer who was particularly associated at this time with structuralist film.⁹ Furthermore, Michelson was one of the few writers whose critical interests spanned both Rainer’s practice as a dancer-choreographer and her work as a film director. She even made an appearance (as a non-dancer) in one of Rainer’s dance works (Continuous Project—Altered Daily) and was an actor in a later film, Journeys from Berlin/1971 (1979). In the latter—perhaps as another art-world-insider joke—Michelson plays the part of a psychoanalytic patient, a scenario that suggests a particular attention to the realm of feelings.

The question of artistic milieu evoked in Schneemann’s script is, moreover, a central feature of an important two-part essay in Artforum by Michelson on Rainer’s transition from dance to film. She places an emphasis not on Rainer’s turn to feelings but rather on the other side of Schneemann’s binary, her affiliation with structuralist film, and develops a political reading grounded in the specificities of social milieu.¹⁰ Though located in SoHo, the center of the New York art world at the time, these artists are, Michelson contends, “entirely on the periphery of their world’s economy,” making this work “inassimilable to commodity value.”¹¹ She goes on to

---

⁹ Carolee Schneemann, Correspondence Course: An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 366. Schneemann points out that the source for this recounted conversation was not in fact in anything Michelson herself said about her films, but rather it was a position imagined by one of Michelson’s students.
¹¹ Annette Michelson, “Yvonne Rainer, Part One: The Dancer and the Dance,” Artforum 12, no. 5 (January 1974), p. 57. SoHo in the early 1970s may well have been the center of a vigorous contemporary art market, but we should remember that it was nothing like the high-end shopping district and
say: “Existing and developing within their habitat as if on a reservation, they are
crimed to a strict reflexiveness. The result is an art of critical discourse, con-
sumptiong autoanalytical, at every point explicative of the problems attendant upon
the constant revision of the grammar and syntax of that discourse.”

Michelson persuasively suggests an analogic relationship between the socioeconomich isolation of
the practitioners and the internal organization of the art forms, wherein the latter’s
formal rigor and reflexivity is a product of—and even constrained by—this social
reality. This socioeconomich isolation, she further argues, invests the art form with a
“radical aspiration.”

Michelson had previously discussed the staging of this periph-
ery in relation to the references to downtown urbanism in Michael Snow’s
*Wavelength* (1969), the sine qua non of reflexive structuralist film. A spatial traversal
of a bare loft space is the structuring principle of Snow’s film, and the dilapidated
space itself is a central feature in Michelson’s reading. In “Yvonne Rainer, Part
One” she aligns Rainer’s dance work with structural film, and develops this thematic
of urbanism into a more evolved analysis.

The now-iconic SoHo loft and the desolate downtown streets of New York
are indeed significant sites in *Film About a Woman Who . . .* But numerous other
spaces and places are introduced through still photographs and projected slides.
With its spatial-temporal multiplicity, *Film About a Woman Who . . .* articulates refer-
tentiality beyond the closed milieu Michelson suggests for *Lives of Performers*
and related structuralist practices. The film, moreover, repeatedly references New York
as a tourist location, a different economic staging from the art world altogether.
The loft, however, remains an important location for Rainer. Treated like a the-
atrical stage—an effect enhanced by Babette Mangolte’s tableau-style camerawork—the setting is transformed from bedroom to dining room to dance studio
to party space. A table reappears as a bed, and a mattress is used in a dance config-
uration together with the sofa that additionally serves as a seat for a number of
different social occasions that are meant to connote different locations. These
items are recognizable objects associated with Rainer’s dance oeuvre, but in the
film they are used very differently. Here, within a filmic narrative framework, the
emotional, erotic, and psychical associations provoked by these objects—objects,
she notes in 1966, “that in themselves have a ‘load’ of associations (e.g., the mat-
tress—sleep, dreams, sickness, unconsciousness, sex) but which can be exploited

---

published in 1969, is P. Adams Sitney, “Structural Film,” in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde,*


14. The title of the film refers in part to the sine wave that forms the soundtrack. An aural parallel
with the zoom, the sine wave gradually increases from 50 cycles per second to 12,000 toward the end.
For an elaboration of this aspect of *Wavelength* and an excellent close reading of the film and its con-
strictly as neutral ‘objects’” — are brought decisively to the fore. Through the introduction of plotlines that belong to mainstream narrative cinema, Rainer embeds the peripheral spaces of the New York art world within a dispersed narrative framework, and *Film About a Woman Who . . .* explores structures of referentiality that operate through the fictional.

Rainer’s staging of this social milieu in terms of the romantic plotlines typical to the “feminine” form of the melodrama has led certain critics to dismiss her early feature films in sociopolitical terms. For example, David James has disparagingly referred to *Film About a Woman Who . . .* as a “bourgeois psychodrama” without “political commitment . . . [to] sexual and class politics.” Drawing on James’s argument, Philip Glahn negatively compares the film’s emotional themes with the opening suicide scene in Bertolt Brecht and Slaten Dudlow’s *Kuhle Wampe* (1932), arguing that “the private [in *Film About a Woman Who . . .*] is the material for a nonmaterialist (in the Marxist sense) structural investigation.” Both Glahn and James conform to what Raymond Williams describes as “one dominant strain within Marxism, with its habitual abuse of the ‘subjective’ and the ‘personal,’” an approach that instead tends to value “ideological systems of fixed social generality.” Such evaluative oppositions—social versus personal—are typically underpinned by a rigid temporal logic of past and present: “The social is the fixed and explicit—the known human relationships, institutions, formations, positions”—and is “always past,” while “all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal: this, here, now, alive, active, ‘subjective.’” (p. 128) Although fixed social forms are more easily discernible in cultural works, Williams is concerned with the shifting, lived present as “social experience in solution.” (p. 133) Displacing the social/personal opposition, he defines the personal as a social experience prior to institutionalized change, “emergent” or “pre-emergent”; and yet this is an understanding of the social that exerts a pressure on thought and action that in turn generates change. “Such change,” Williams argues, “can be defined as changes in structures of feeling.” (p. 132) This is not the social change associated with the grandiosity of the revolution or the certainty of the politically committed, as James has it, but change at the social level in the textures and feelings of everyday life.

17. Philip Glahn, “Brechtian Journeys: Yvonne Rainer’s Film as Counter-Public Art,” *Art Journal* 68, no. 2 (Summer 2009), p. 81. Glahn uses *Film About a Woman Who . . .* as a critical foil for his analysis of her later *Journeys from Berlin/1971* (1979), which he sees as genuinely Brechtian in its staging of the “proletarian public sphere.”
19. The term “emergent” refers to cultural forms that mark a particular moment of social change in the present. The emergent—an important aesthetic category for Williams—is understood in contrast to the “dominant” as well as the remainders of past cultural forms that he refers to as “residual.” See Raymond Williams, “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent,” in *Marxism and Literature*, pp. 121–27.
There is a further complexity in this particular case, since the “changes in structures of feeling” discernible in *Film About a Woman Who* . . . are figured through the explicit staging of personal feelings. Michelson’s analogic analysis of socio-economic isolation through the closed internal organization of the formal structure of the medium might better describe the social experience, the *structures of feeling*, of the avant-garde milieu of the 1960s. And her very inability to engage fully Rainer’s turn to feelings is an indication of an emergent cultural shift—a new sexual politics—and, at the same time, a registration of the difficulties this generates in the context of the New York art world. While the social and indeed the *political* significance of the personal was a central tenet of the women’s movement from the late 1960s onward, in the art world it remained problematically associated with the “expressive” masculine subject of the New York School of painting. The latter is an understanding of emotion that Rei Terada refers to as the “expressive hypothesis,” the assumption that emotion resides in a centered subject. Such assumptions lead people, even such nuanced critics as Michelson, to “deploy emotion in epistemologically defensive ways.”

Terada’s study *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the “Death of the Subject”* focuses on the centrality of emotion in poststructuralist thought and offers a corrective to the view that the “death of the subject” means the absence or fading of emotion. Her conceptualization, influenced by psychoanalysis and feminism, is particularly relevant to Rainer’s work and to this period in postwar art, for Rainer’s practice in the 1960s, in common with all of the main art movements of the decade (Minimalism, Pop art, and Conceptual art), eschewed psychological interiority in a reaction against Abstract Expressionism’s emphasis on the individual ego. In contrast to Fredric Jameson’s much-cited assertion about postmodernism—that “the end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of psychopathologies of that ego—what I have called the waning of affect . . . since there is no longer a self present to do with feeling”—Terada offers a *nons*ubjective theory of emotion. Her counterintuitive claim is that “we would have no emotion if we were [centered] subjects.” (p. 4) And, moreover, “far from controverting the ‘death of the subject,’ emotion entails this death.” (p. 3) In a critical analysis of Jameson’s central aesthetic example, Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980), she argues: “Even if the observer does not pity Warhol’s shoes as though they were animate, she can still, with equal anthropomorphism, feel sorry for their inability to inspire sorrow. Any apparent ebbing of pathos makes more as well as less pathos: the less pathetic the end of pathos is, the more pathetic it is that it isn’t pathetic anymore.” (p. 14)


21. In her turn to emotion, Rainer rejects the “expressive hypothesis” precisely because of its association with various expressionist tendencies dominant in the 1950s. While Abstract Expressionism looms large in art-historical accounts of this period (and my account is biased in this disciplinary direction), from the perspective of dance history Rainer’s expressionist bête noire was Martha Graham, with whom she took classes in the 1950s. Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), p. 183.

Terada presents a useful general distinction between terms that are frequently seen as interchangeable: affect, emotion, and feeling. Emotion and affect are interrelated: The former is understood as a psychological state, internal to the subject (e.g., Terada’s feelings of pathos at the loss of pathos in Warhol); the latter is its physiological registration (e.g., facial expression or, in Abstract Expressionism, the gestural mark). Feeling, in Terada’s account, is the meeting of these two realms, “the common ground of the physiological and the psychological.” (p. 4) I have steered clear of using the term “affect,” since Rainer tends to evoke the psychological aspects of emotion carefully separated from their physiological manifestations. She thus avoids the expressive gesture associated with the idea of the centered subject. Furthermore, as a dancer-choreographer, Rainer is particularly attuned to physiognomic meaning, and “feeling” is a rather significant word for her. It suggests a meeting place for body and mind, a theme that cuts across her whole oeuvre—from dance to film to writing—as reflected in the sentiments suggested by *The Mind Is a Muscle* (1966) and *Feelings Are Facts* (2006).23

**Plot/Narrative**

Although structuralist film negates the conventional codes of cinematic narrative as defined by Hollywood, Michelson has suggested that narrative is in fact reintroduced into the North American avant-garde film with key structuralist works. And in this regard she rightly connects Rainer’s filmic practice with figures such as Snow and Frampton. Until this intervention, she argues, filmmakers used strategies such as, “assertive editing, super-imposition, the insistence on the presence of the filmmaker behind the moving, handheld instrument, [and] the resulting disjunctive, gestural *facture,*” in order to “destroy that spatio-temporal continuity which had sustained narrative convention.”24 Structuralist film, on the other hand, presents a reduced and abstracted form of narrative as opposed to its negation. It treats narrative as a discursive form almost without a signified, emptied—as far as possible—of content or “story.” Michelson first proposes this analysis of narrative form in relation to Snow’s *Wavelength*. As the camera zooms into close-up across the loft space from one end to another, the spectator is held in a state of suspense, and “by emptying the space of his film (dramatically, through extreme distancing, visually by presenting it as mere volume, the ‘scene’ of pure movement in time), Snow has redefined filmic space as that of action.” (p. 32) *Wavelength*, Michelson contends, is “a grand metaphor of narrative form.” (p. 32)

23. For an excellent, psychoanalytically inflected elaboration of the influence of structuralist thinking in art of the late 1960s and 1970s, see Eve Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Despite its use in the book’s subtitle, affect is a lesser concern in Meltzer’s account; it functions as a kind of psychically charged blind spot within the system. As such, the opposition of structure and feeling remains largely in place for Meltzer (even as she analyzes a certain set of feelings for, or *love* of systems). For an account of the legacy in contemporary art of feminism’s political turn to feeling, see Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2013).

The French film theorist Raymond Bellour has described “the generalized form of narrative” in terms of the idea of alternation. By alternation he means the way that film is organized according to the basic principle of “dividing, joining up, and redividing.” This works at the level of cinematic codes, such as crosscutting, a strategy typical of classical Hollywood cinema (you see the character, then a view of what s/he is looking at), as well as diegetically, in terms of the arc of the story. Narrative-as-alternation is multileveled; it includes camera movement, editing, and plot or cinematic diegesis, and Bellour draws on examples from both classical Hollywood film and avant-garde films to develop this thesis. With reference to Peter Kubelka’s Arnulf Rainer (1958–60) and Snow’s La Région Centrale (1971) and <-> (Back and Forth) (1968–69), he suggests that these films can be seen as approaching the zero degree of narrative, that is, narrative as an almost empty form.

What is important about these theoretical approaches is that they do not equate plot or story to narrative; a film may be understood according to the laws of the latter without its seeming to address the former in any significant way. In Wavelength, for example, plot and narrative are put into a dissonant relationship. The elements of plot—the most dramatic being the discovery of a dead body in the loft—are not subject to the narrative as a structuring feature of the film. The camera continues to traverse the length of the space, rendering the potentially lurid whodunit story line superfluous. As a result, it serves as a kind of wry comic aside on the centrality given to the affective aspects associated with the typical story lines of mainstream cinema. The separation of narrative structure from plot is also evident in Rainer’s work, but unlike Snow in Wavelength, the reference to cinematic plot is given a much greater role. Film About a Woman Who . . . includes all of the elements of plot: characters, story lines, and a narrator, not to mention the generic themes of melodrama (love and betrayal). Drawing on “writerly” strategies forged by the nouveau roman, Film About a Woman Who . . . seems to loosen plot from narrative structure in order to explore the ways in which sexual difference operates for each. Thus, I will argue, her engagement with this shift in structures of feeling is discernible through, not in spite of, her experiments with narrative form.

The reduction of the film’s diegetic framework into the arc of a plot-based narrative—a woman who is dissatisfied with her cheating lover becomes enraged and eventually achieves some sort of personal resolution—says nothing at all about its

27. Ibid., p. 81.
28. I do not have the space to adequately develop Rainer’s engagement with the writing strategies associated with the nouveau roman, which was widely influential in the New York cultural scene of the 1960s. The text that influenced her the most is Alain Robbe-Grillet, For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1989). The classic theoretical account is Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, 1st American ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).
complex layered texture. There are recurring places, spaces, photographic images, and formal techniques that cycle around in rhythmic repetition. The opening scenes of the film lay out many of the key strategies and motifs Rainer uses, as well as the “alternating” use of metonymy that forms the sequential links from scene to scene. Attending closely to the opening of the film, I will offer some insight into its texture and logic as a whole, so that my analysis of the structure of Film About a Woman Who . . . through just one section is also in keeping with the central place of synecdoche and metonymy in Rainer’s early film aesthetic.

With the use of black-on-white typewriter typeface, the film’s opening titles declare the debt that Film About a Woman Who . . . owes to literary form, even before the voice-over (as narrator) begins. When sound enters (during the title sequence) in the form of sound-effect thunderclap and rain, the clichéd narrative opening “It was a dark and stormy night” is the immediate association. Thus Rainer’s exploration of melodrama, the exaggeratedly emotional, will not be without a good dose of irony. The first visual shows us the loft space with the four main characters sitting on a couch—he/she/he/she—in an alternating arrangement predicated on gender. The unnatural stormy soundtrack continues, and an intermittent flashing of light suggests lightning outside, at least until the narrator tells us that the four figures are watching slides. This sequence foregrounds not only the importance of representation but also the act of spectatorship, and the narrative alternation implied by the slide sequence—the continuity of one after the other—evokes the idea of a metonymic relation of one image to the next. In contrast to the emotional turmoil suggested by the overblown use of pathetic fallacy (the storm), the narrative voice—a female voice (Rainer’s)—delivers the lines in a deadpan manner, without inflection, as if she were reading off a page. The internal psychological staging of emotion is present in excess, but crucially it is without affect. The physiological, that is, affectless, registration of the voice—flat, even, slightly mechanical—is in tension with the emotional content of the statements that we associate with the figures seated on the couch: “he feels a growing irritation . . .”; “she . . . was surprised at her response—mild distaste rather than the rage she had anticipated.” This is more than a straightforward contrast, since “voice,” a dominant feature running through the film, is, together with “the face,” seen as a privileged vector for affect.29 With the deadpan delivery, Rainer brackets affect, separating it from emotion without, however, negating the emotional charge evident in the diaristic quality of these personal disclosures.

From the loft, we move to the beach. Two of the figures from the couch are in frame, positioned apart, one in close-up, the other in a distance shot, and the significance of photography in the film as a whole is further reinforced when the

---

29. The philosophical writing on this topic is vast. Two representative texts are Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), and Jacques Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). For the classic account of the ethical address as figured through the close-up of the face in film (the “affection image”), see Gilles Deleuze, Cinema I: The Movement-Image, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Haberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1986), pp. 81–133.
woman positions a piece of glass in front of the camera. A metaphor for the reflexive, this gesture suggests a variety of things: the glass of the camera lens, the old-fashioned slide (celluloid film between two small panes of glass), and the glass associated with the dominant metaphor for naive realism—the window onto another world. Caught as we are in a metonymic chain of images, the couple, now joined by a child—making a heterosexual family unit—all act the part of figures in a photograph, freezing their poses into the arrangements of a series of typical holiday snapshots. (These include just as many “bad” photographs, with heads cut out of the frame, as successful ones.) 30 The presentation of still photography is returned to throughout Film About a Woman Who . . . as figures repeatedly pose like photographs, and there are several sequences of old family photographs (personal photographs), the first of which comes next. These are historical images of groups of mainly women, pre–World War II bourgeois or petit bourgeois studio portraits

30. The question of photography and Judson dance practices of the 1960s is addressed throughout Carrie Lambert-Beatty’s influential book on Rainer’s dance practice. See Lambert-Beatty, Being Watched.
of what seem to be ethnically Central European figures, but devoid of visual or textual context. These indexical signs point to an elsewhere, to an emotional resonance we cannot access; an instance from the past that is present to us now, but “that-has-been.” They thus serve as figures of the emotional, but because they remain unknown to us and adopt stiff, formal poses, emotion once again is severed from its affective expression in physiological terms. Again and again we return to these images: unknown women who punctuate the film, other possibilities perhaps for the woman who.

The plot thickens as the man from the beach is now shown with the other woman at another tourist scene, downtown Manhattan, with the Statue of Liberty in the background. They pose as if they were a couple in a photograph. This marks the beginning of a recurrent confusion or slippage between narrator and acting figures: Who is the “she” and the “he,” and who is the “other woman” that the narrator speaks of? Our questions redouble when the next scene gives a symmetrical reversal of this one: The beach couple appear again, and then the woman and child are shown with the other man in an extended breakfast scene within a loft space. This swapping of men (or of women) recurs throughout the film, producing an effect of unease in the viewer. From the bohemian space of the SoHo loft (Michelson’s peripheral economy), we are brought to another urban economy: tourist New York. Then, returning to the beach (another tourist site), Rainer gives us a demonstration in crosscutting, which is interrupted when the female figure punctures this classic narrative device by turning to acknowledge the camera. These final two visuals—the staging of photographic stillness and of filmic continuity—are accompanied by the rapid-fire partial sentences of the voice-over:

She had set him an impossible task. “... to allow me to ... when I need to,” she had told him. He had reminded her that she was not so ... of his ... She pleaded special circumstances. Yet in some way she trusted him. He would ... They would meet again. If only he could say “But we really ...” Which was all very well for her to say, having jumped the gun in ... Then that terrible accusation of his. She couldn’t even repeat it, it ... Yet it posed another question: “Is it possible that I have really ... , that I will never make ... Only in this way ... survive.” So be it. There are worse ways to live. Being so ... may very well ... She felt, however, little conviction. And finally, she grew calmer, almost resigned. They had both been ... —her terror and the ... —slowly eroding ... and regarding him ... and pleasure.

This stuttering verbal outpouring, only half of which I have cited here, is then followed by ninety seconds of silence as we are returned onscreen to the domestic

---


loft scene. While the texture of the narrator’s voice remains affectively impassive, the staccato rhythm of the phrases, together with the emotional confusion that the repeated, incomplete sentences suggest—like a constantly interrupted stream of consciousness—produces the effect of emotional buildup and release. The timing of this off-kilter delivery generates an affective quality as it is contrasted with the extended ninety seconds of silence. Sound and silence, in the form of music, voice, and sound effect are used in this alternating manner to generate affect throughout the film. With the play between affect and emotion located not simply in subject or theme but in the rhythms of film form itself, the critical opposition of feeling/structure is decisively displaced. Not as a theme or motif, but rather, as Williams describes, through a shift in “forms and conventions—semantic figures” that articulate “specific feelings, specific rhythms” of a changing structure of feeling.33 Affect is wrested free from its secure source in a particular subject, making Rainer’s turn to feeling decisively nonsubjective.

_S/she_

The staging of reflexivity, the displacement of affect, and the disjunction between narrative voice and onscreen action can

make *Film About a Woman Who*. . . a destabilizing viewing experience. The narrative is anchored for us, however, by the relations between pairs of men and women: the two central male/female pairs; two narrators, a man and a woman; and two dancers who perform for the group toward the end of the film, again a male/female pair. Other couples and groups of couples figure in the film, and the relationships between them seem to shift constantly; the two main male protagonists, for example, are depicted as romantically involved with both of the women. All of the couples are referred to by the personal pronouns “he” and “she” (occasionally “I,” “we,” and “you” are used, mainly in quoted speech). The exclusive use of personal pronouns for the film’s characters does not simply suggest “an erotic implication,” as James proposes; rather it emphasizes their grammatical significance and discourages the possibility of reading these figures as having stable characterological identities. Characterology emerges at a historical moment in the development of the novel, when the character appears to gain psychological consistency and is seen, in Roland Barthes’s words, as “an individual, a ‘person,’ in short a fully constituted ‘being.’” Despite the dramatic content of the narrator’s stories, *Film About a Woman Who*. . . disrupts the individual psychological identity of the protagonists by rendering them substitutable with grammatical positions in a preexistent linguistic structure. The repeated reference to “he” and “she” without the development of individuated characters is the clearest example of the film’s nonsubjective attitude toward emotion. Sexual difference, the very subject of the women’s movement, is evident in this repeated assertion of the personal pronoun. It registers a broadly felt shift at the lived social level that is figured as part of the film’s form.

Because of the exclusive use of personal pronouns *Film About a Woman Who* . . . is governed, to an unusual degree, by “grammatical indicators” or “shifters.” Roman Jakobson develops his analysis of the grammatical category of the shifter in relation to the differing modes of reference that Charles Sanders Peirce termed “symbol” and “index.” Glossing Peirce’s two categories, Jakobson writes, “A symbol (e.g., the English word ‘red’) is associated with the represented object by a conventional rule, while an index (e.g., the act of pointing) is in existential relation with the object it represents.” The symbol (e.g., red) describes a determinant thing (either a specifically red item or redness as a general category) arbitrarily, irrespective of its use within an instance of discourse, and the index (e.g., point-
ing) signifies only in relation to a specific message or utterance and thus has a necessary relation to the referent. Shifters, however (and these also include spatial and temporal indicators, such as there, this, that, and then), Jakobson argues, are in fact a combination of the indexical and the symbolic sign: “I means the person uttering I. Thus on the one hand, the sign I cannot represent its object without being associated with the latter ‘by conventional rule,’ . . . consequently I is a symbol. On the other hand, the sign I cannot represent its object without ‘being in existential relation’ with this object: the word I designating the utterer is existentially related to his utterance, and hence functions as an index.”38 As Giorgio Agamben puts it, shifters are “‘empty’ signs” that “become ‘full’ as soon as the speaker assumes them in an instance of discourse.”39 But in Film About a Woman Who . . . this rule is, most unsettlingly, broken. While we recognize “she” and “he” as symbols that refer conventionally to persons of a particular gender, female or male, the specifics of who these individuals might actually be—in the context of a particular utterance—is frequently unresolved. This leads me to ask: What significance might this have during a period when the women’s movement made the relation between “she” and “he” particularly charged?

**Feminist Questions/Queer Scenes**

The title of Film About a Woman Who . . . generates an enigma, and, in classic Hollywood fashion, it creates the appearance of natural inevitability for the movement of the narrative towards resolution. But the riddle proposed by Rainer’s title persists unresolved for the duration of the film: Who is the woman who? Either of the two women who play the central role could be this woman, but neither of them can be decisively identified as such. The narrative is also about “the other woman,” but this does not help us in identifying the woman who, or indeed whether she could be “the other woman.” Although the film includes numerous autobiographical references and Rainer herself reads the female narrative voice, at no point does the narrative voice diverge from the third person, nor does it securely fix on a specific individual as the primary subject, least of all the film’s director. The emphasis placed on the grammatical position reinforces the identity of this shifting category “she” as a generalized category as opposed to a specific woman (whether a fictional character or historical figure). Cleaving apart the pronoun’s function as symbol-index leaves us without a subject for the particular utterance. Might the structure of equivalence established by the film, predicated on the opposition s/he, suggest that Film About a Woman Who . . . is about the identity and constitution of “woman”?

Rainer’s films were received in both North America and Britain almost immediately following their release as important contributions to an emerging

38. Ibid.
body of feminist art; this was before Rainer felt comfortable calling herself a feminist. In a 1975 interview with Lucy Lippard, she indicates that her engagement with female experience did not emerge through a personal involvement in the women’s movement, and so she still felt uncomfortable claiming a feminist position, despite sharing many of the same political concerns. But Rainer’s own early ambivalence about feminism did not stop the interpretation of her work in the light of such debates. In 1975, in the wake of the critical acclaim of her feature films, Cindy Nemser, the editor of Feminist Art Journal, published an interview with Rainer and used her head shot on the magazine’s cover. This outward celebration of the artist was, however, undercut by Nemser’s rather hostile editorial in which she challenged Rainer’s status as a feminist artist based on her “modernism” and “intellectualism.” In contrast, a year later in 1976, the editorial collective of the feminist film journal Camera Obscura devoted half of the journal’s inaugural issue to a celebration and critical exploration of Rainer’s work in film. Her practice was so important for this journal for the same reasons Nemser rejected it: because of her success in combining feminism with modernist aesthetic practices. For each side of the debate the question of both female and feminist collectivity is central. For Nemser, Rainer’s film does not represent—politically or aesthetically—us as women and feminists; she is too close to “her fellow modernists,” who, it is implied, are not women and/or not feminists. The Camera Obscura Collective argues that the shifting grammatical subject “she” in Film About a Woman Who . . . provides the “critical spectator” with an alternative form of emotional identification, and through this a feminist collectivity is formed at the grammatical level: She becomes us—a collectivity of informed critical individuals. Despite the contrasting evaluation of Rainer’s work, there is nonetheless a shared desire for feminist collectivity, and these two differing perspectives indicate how fraught this question can be. Rainer is rightly wary of the term feminist as it applies to Film About a Woman Who . . . , since this is not normatively a feminist film. By this I mean it does not declare its feminism, but rather it captures the structures of feeling that feminism was beginning to exert on social experience at the time.

The women’s movement could be characterized as emerging by way of a critical debate about the constitution of women’s oppression understood independently from other forms of oppression (e.g., class and race). It sought therefore to define a politics based on the specificity of the experience of women as a group, which by implication meant defining “woman.” In relation to this issue, Judith

Butler argues, “Every time that specificity is articulated, there is resistance and factionalization within the very constituency that is supposed to be unified by the articulation of its common element.” Butler is responding to some of the problems that have haunted feminism over the issue of collectivity, where two of the main questions debated have been Whose particular experience does the generalizable category of woman describe? and Does the white middle-class heterosexual Western woman inscribe herself as the model for a universalizable “woman”? While the political and philosophical category of “woman” is now a recognized problematic in feminist theory and has been institutionalized as part of the academy, Film About a Woman Who . . . , I suggest, captures this problematic as an emergent social force.

In relation to differences of class and race, the milieu Rainer describes is white, metropolitan, and bourgeois (however bohemian in flavor). Furthermore, the film appears to endorse the identity of woman as such as corresponding to a heteronormative understanding of gendering with its numerous heterosexual couples whose identity is grammatically determined. But at the same time it indicates the limits and the dissolution of that system. The first instance of a break in this sex-gender system is at the level of the narrating subject. Early on in the film, the narrative voice describes “her” going to dinner with “him,” “his male lover,” and their friends. She describes these friends as “old-fashioned faggots . . . who still refer to each other as ‘she.’” This brief narrative fragment suggests that just as the gendered grammatical positions used throughout the film cannot be decisively matched up to the onscreen protagonists, neither do they automatically refer to appropriately sexed bodies. Later on there is a dinner scene with a woman and two men that bears a close relationship to the one recounted earlier by the narrator. It includes a gesture of sensual bodily intimacy between the two male figures—one wipes a smear of butter from the corner of the other’s mouth—needless to say, both men had previously been staged in heterosexual pairings. This takes place while the female figure recounts her (unrequited) youthful passion for a gay friend of her brother Ernie, one of the few instances of synchronized sound that is de-naturalized by the actor, who repeats the exact same words twice in an affectively depleted deadpan voice.

Evoking queerness, however incidental it might seem, interrupts the heterosexuality of the plot that until this point has functioned as a well-oiled narrative machine driven by the gender stability of the grammatical shifter. This textual

45. One of the classic US feminist books to engage the problem of the differences between women is Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983). For an early theoretical elaboration of this problematic in an international frame, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” Critical Inquiry 12, no. 1 (Fall 1985), pp. 243–61. This is but the tip of a very large scholarly iceberg.
glitch, moreover, prepares the viewer for a much more dramatic visual set piece, a queer scene in which a woman and a man undress another woman while a third woman watches. The sexual dynamics of this scene suggest a destabilizing of heteronormative categories: It is neither clearly straight nor lesbian. The scene is divided, more or less, into two parts that are skillfully cleaved—both split and joined—by Mangolte’s virtuoso camerawork. The camera tracks in, excruciatingly slowly, to extreme close-up on the pubic area of the woman being stripped—in an eroticized reference to Snow’s Wavelength—and out again before swinging slowly toward another extreme close-up on the face of the “other woman,” a third woman observing this sexual (though not exactly sexy) scene. The tableau format suggests that she is being undressed for the camera; the woman is thus proffered, and proffers herself to us, the viewers, bringing us into this shifting scene of desire. While the opening sections include the third watching woman, played by Rainer, she disappears from the frame as the stripped woman’s final piece of underwear is slowly removed during the culminating section of the extended tracking shot. The camera retraces its steps, tracking out in reverse, and as the view slowly widens, the male figure reciprocates its movement by slowly pulling the nude woman’s underwear back up her legs. At the exact moment when the woman’s sex is once again covered, the camera gradually, though decisively, shifts its action toward Rainer’s face, disfigured by (as yet unidentifiable) textual fragments. The whole section, approximately fifteen minutes in length, is presented without any sound. The longest period of silence is then broken with the film’s most emotionally charged expression of a woman’s love and desire for a man: a particular man, George Jackson. As the bearer of the only proper name in Film About a Woman . . . (aside from Ernie), Jackson’s body and mind are the subject of this most passionate and sincere text, which is quite unlike the urbane neurotic anxieties of the other plotlines. The author, although she goes unnamed, would have been clearly recognizable to contemporary audiences as Angela Davis, the young black intellectual and affiliate of the Black Panthers, whose personal diary—published in the press—was used to dramatic effect in her 1972 trial for kidnapping and murder, certainly the most significant political trial America had seen in decades. At this moment in the film, racial difference disrupts the normative coding of whiteness as the anchor for heteronormativity. The gendered pairing is coded within the newspaper text as archetypical of heterosexual romance as it adopts the language of the juridically sanctioned heterosexual couple: husband and wife. Since the newspaper text is in the same typeface as the other text used in the film, and because some of it is read out by the narrative voice, its continuity with the other narratives is reinforced. But

47. While the camera in Snow’s film zooms into close-up across the loft space and Mangolte performs a tracking shot in this segment of Film About a Woman Who . . ., Rainer has indicated that she intended this as an homage to Wavelength and only later learned that Snow’s film used a zoom (email, August 20, 2014).
48. Davis and Jackson were not actually married. The adoption of a husband/wife description for a common-law relationship was frequently used in the black movement. For a critical feminist discussion of this, see Michelle Wallace, “Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood,” in Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory (London: Verso, 1990).
this romantic couple mark a shift from the generic (racially unmarked, white) woman as such to the specific woman: this black woman, Angela Davis. Even though the romantic narrative staged in the Davis-diary extracts resembles the other stories of “him” and “her,” this scene, like the queer scenario, arrests the process of interchangeability of protagonists with grammatical figures. The use of the proper name—George Jackson—and its implied complement—Angela Davis—disrupts the circuit of linguistic substitution set up in the film.49

This expression of erotic passion and romantic love between these two political figures, figures for the political, no less—who enter the film through the archetypical personal, emotional, and private form, the diary—is presented in a visually remarkable way. The camera tracks in extreme close-up on the female actor’s face, where newspaper clippings of the text are attached like delicate archi-


*Rainer. Film About a Woman Who . . . . 1974.*
tectonic facets or informational signs from a Constructivist set. Floating precariously on the surface of the face, this privileged figure for the affective fills the whole expanse of the screen. The camera circles slowly, intimately, tenderly even, across the planes of the face—cheek, forehead, and chin—close enough to read the printed text. When the narrative voice floods in after this extended period of silence, the emotional quality of Davis’s declaration of love is only enhanced.

Y’s voice. An hour and a half since the last embrace . . . you’re still here, I see you, we are one, and this indestructible togetherness they’ll never be powerful enough to wrest away from us. . . . That so much love could exist anywhere, in any two people, even between us, I never realized. It makes me feel all fluttery and kind of weak, not enough though in the sense of succumbing to weakness, for it makes me feel so much stronger . . . my life-long husband. 50

50. Rainer, The Films of Yvonne Rainer, p. 92. Moving to the next textual fragment and dissolving to a close-up, the remaining segment—which includes the name George Jackson—is not read out by the narrative voice but is presented as an intertitle: “It all adds up to one thing: I love you George Jackson, every inch on the outside and all the depths and dimensions of your awe-inspiring mind.” (p. 92)
The same deadpan, affectless voice is now revealed as the figuration of affect itself. With the erotic residue of the previous moment, once again, feeling floats free from a centered subject.

The political pressure placed on the collective category woman by other forms of difference is registered as an interruption to the dominant narrative structure and figured as an emergent social force not yet institutionalized as part of feminist theory. If, as the opening two quotations of this essay suggest, Rainer’s work of the 1960s is concerned with the duality of mind and body, active and passive, subject and object, in the 1970s her turn to feelings marks a displacement of these oppositions through a new potential for social collectivity. The personal takes on a greater significance and asserts a social force that is prior to its institutional codification in the discourses of identity that came to define the art world of the 1980s and 1990s.

Camera/Gaze

In an analysis of the fifth in a series of short 16mm films that represent Rainer’s earliest forays into the medium, *Line* (1969), Carrie Lambert-Beatty suggests that we can see the beginnings of Rainer’s feminist practice: “The asexual, cultureless body of minimalism gradually becomes unsustainable . . . [f]or the meaning of ‘object’ has shifted.” Lambert-Beatty rehearses a well-known narrative related to the development of feminist film theory: “Object becomes objectification . . . no longer that material, physical, and situated thing-in-itself, stripped of interpretable content, it is now object as in ‘object of the gaze.’” Lambert-Beatty is referring, of course, to Laura Mulvey’s enormously influential manifesto of 1975, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” While Mulvey’s essay postdates Rainer’s first two feature films, its phenomenal influence is indicative, as Lambert-Beatty suggests, of a broader cultural turn. But the impact of Mulvey’s gendering of the cinematic apparatus—with the spectator as implicitly masculine and the camera as the vehicle for this disembodied “male gaze”—can blind us to other kinds of readings, other emergent structures of feeling.

If the reference to Davis and Jackson disrupts the film’s narrative machine as the race- and class-coded woman challenges the feminist desire for a stable notion of female collectivity, the queer scenario offers another kind of disruption: It registers the mobility of desire within the experience of cinema spectatorship. Miriam Hansen has suggested that a similar unfixing of desire is in fact discernible in Mulvey’s landmark essay in relation to her characterization of the female spec-

52. Ibid., p. 197.
tator as transvestite, occupying the place of the “male gaze.” Hansen’s interpretation wrests “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” free from the rigidity of its apparent heteronormativity, pushing its insights in a different feminist direction.

The figure of the transvestite suggests that female spectatorship involves dimensions of self-reflexivity and role-playing, rather than simply an opposition of active and passive. The perceptual performance of sexual mobility anticipates, on a playful, fictional level, the possibility of social arrangements not founded upon a hierarchically fixed sexual identity. 54

Queerness, then, as Hansen suggests, is implicit in the psychical role-play of cinema spectatorship rather than the hegemonic imposition of masculine psychic formation. Moreover, as other writers have argued, bringing to the fore what might seem to be a minor suggestion within Mulvey’s text is fully in keeping with its generic form as a feminist manifesto. 55 In relation to Film About a Woman Who . . . , we must remember, the disruption in these few significant scenes of the fixed gendered opposition that is established by the shifter reveals the power of its otherwise normative enforcement. The latter can be seen, for example, in James’s critical reading, wherein he remains caught within the film’s structure of grammatical gendering, blinded to any divergence from the hegemony of fixed heterosexuality. James reads the stripping scene not as an attack on normative heterosexuality but rather as a normative heterosexual attack. He describes this scene as the “objectification of a woman, . . . uncomfortably, indeed brutally, exploitative,” with Rainer as “spectator to” and “director of” a “visual rape.” 56 Given the erotic staging of the scene, the question of its emotional aspect—arousal, apprehension, unease—is clearly at stake, and all of this is presented through controlled physicality. Yet the scene once again is depleted of affect, which, we recall from Terada, registers in physiological terms. The bodies are treated like, or appear as, objects: There is no sound, no voice narrates, and the extreme immobility of the figures, both the woman being stripped and the onlooker, renders them as mannequins in a peculiar dream space. The denuded woman, it should be noted, directs both the male and female figures with subtle gestures and looks, proffering various body parts—a foot for removing the shoe, for example—all of which complicates any easy understanding of her as active or passive. James’s analysis, loaded with righteous feminist pathos, rests on seeing the female figure in characterological terms, as “an individual, a ‘person,’ in short a fully constituted ‘being,’” despite or perhaps because of all that Rainer works to displace. Challenging this reading is

55. For an elaborated analysis of the nonacademic context of its production and a reading of the essay’s manifesto structure, see Mandy Merck, “Mulvey’s Manifesto,” Camera Obscura 22, no. 3 66 (Winter 2007), pp. 1–23.
56. James, Allegories of Cinema, p. 331.
not just a matter of scholarly difference, since the vehemence of James’s recoil registers the complex nonsubjective way in which Rainer stages the politics of feeling. He feels all the more because the onscreen figures appear not to. The apparent absence of affect thus occasions an increase in its outpouring.

Coda: Against Brecht

In a 1976 interview in Camera Obscura, Rainer, resisting the Collective’s desire to press Film About a Woman Who . . . into the mold of a Brechtian aesthetic, responds in the following terms:

repetition, stillness, allusion, prolonged duration, fragmented speech and framing, “self conscious” camera movement etc. Rather than being integrated into the story, these things at times replace the story. Because they are interesting or beautiful or funny, not because they alienate or “distance” the audience.\(^{57}\)

And let us recall once again part of the second quotation with which I opened this essay: “Rage, terror, desire, conflict et al., are not unique to my experience the way my body and its functioning are. I now—as a consequence—feel much more connected to my audience.” This sense of connection, of collectivity, this exploration of the personal, the emotional, is realized not through the story but when the story is suspended and interrupted by Rainer’s play with filmic form. This is decisively not the “Brechtian” aesthetic that had already become institutionalized as a set of critical procedures by the mid-1970s, but rather a different set of semantic figures, including the “beautiful,” as Rainer disarmingly puts it.\(^{58}\)

An emergent social consciousness, in Williams’s terms, a shift in the structures of feeling through new forms of reflexivity, Rainer’s Film About a Woman Who . . . begins to unpack the complex social changes and conflicts embedded in that simple slogan “The personal is the political.”

---

57. Yvonne Rainer, “Interview by the Camera Obscura Collective [1976],” in A Woman Who . . ., p. 156. Her use of the terms “alienate” and “distance” are references to Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt, which has been variously translated into English as “alienation effect,” “distanciation,” or “estrangement.”