

***Feminism, Theory, Film: Critical Intersections in the Practice and  
Theorization of Experimental Filmmaking since the 1970s***  
**(Introduction)**

Sonja Boos  
University of Oregon

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Since the 1970s, a generation of filmmaker theorists arising out of second- and early third-wave feminism has reshaped how we conceive of the relationship between filmmaking and critical writing about film. Christine Noll Brinckmann, Abigail Child, Michelle Citron, Marjorie Keller, Julia Lesage, Laura Mulvey, and Ula Stöckl are just a few examples of feminist film scholars whose contributions to film theory are complemented by their filmmaking credits. As veritable scholar-practitioners, they have used the filmic medium as a tool of both theoretical engagement and creative discovery, echoing modernism's preoccupation with the reciprocal relationship of art and life. Invested in a film culture that was marked by parallel efforts of experimental writing and radical filmmaking, they analyzed and resisted the workings of patriarchy by exposing and reimagining the displaced and distorted images of women that are woven into film's often misogynist iconography. Along with their forays into critical filmmaking practices, these scholars also undertook a sustained theoretical discussion of how to fuse radical politics with alternative representations.

This confluence of a desire to make feminist films and, simultaneously, theorize them is due to several factors. The women's liberation movement created a greater consciousness of women's oppression, which went hand in hand with an increased awareness of the challenges that women filmmakers faced. The practice of filmmaking thus became part of a larger strategy of organizing and building a public sphere for feminist politics. Women professionals organized to improve the conditions of film production and reception, while also teaching each other 8mm filmmaking. At the time, low-budget media such as Super 8 film and video were becoming available at a fraction of the cost of 16mm. A newfound spirit of solidarity and collaboration led to the formation of filmmaker collectives (and later

independent media groups) who went on to organize the first autonomous women's film festivals, such as the "Films by Women—Chicago '74" festival in the United States and the 1973 "International Women's Film Seminar" in Berlin, Germany. Co-organized by Helke Sanders and Claudia von Alemann, the latter festival brought together female filmmakers from seven countries and several hundred women activists who viewed and discussed nearly four dozen films, many of which were being screened for the first time. The majority of the films were shot on 16mm, produced on very low budgets with minimal crews, and self-financed. These were not feature-length narrative films but short didactic docudramas and cinema-verité style observational documentaries exploring personal experiences and communal histories. They were experimental films, narrowly understood as an anti-narrative, anti-illusion-driven, avant-garde form.

As the name indicates, the Women's Film Seminar provided a cerebral platform for discussing film; a festival brochure summarized key points of the debate and suggested further readings. From its inception, the production and exhibition of feminist film was intertwined with questions about its critical reception. Newly founded journals like *Jump Cut*, *Women and Film*, *Camera Obscura*, and *Frauen und Film* provided a feminist perspective on the marginalization of women's film within the dominant cultural sphere of mass society while also working to heighten the visibility of alternative and radical films. As Annette Brauerhoch observes: "From the beginning, the concern was a recovery of history, a rewriting and re-evaluation of women's contribution to film history, a re/consideration of the working conditions of women in the industry, an analysis of current film productions, and a recognition of the social relevance of film" (162). Feminist film journals like *Frauen und Film* thus participated in a process of theory formation that helped solidify the status of feminist film criticism. Situated on the discursive margins, their critical practice combined a high level of theoretical reflection with a capacity for self-reflection, which had always been part of the feminist project itself. In the process, "this connection between filmmakers and their critical focus on production conditions with a more theoretically informed examination and re-

evaluation of film history became looser as the years progressed,” as Brauerhoch notes. “Ultimately, the balance tipped more to the side of theory” (164).

In the 1970s and 80s, feminist film theory developed and flourished within the institutional context of the university, especially in the Anglo-Saxon academy where the influence of Marxist psychoanalytic feminism, race and queer theory, and postcolonial studies provided both new frameworks and renewed legitimacy for studying film. *Frauen und Film* was influential in transporting this kind of high-level feminist film scholarship to a German audience. As Brauerhoch writes, Anglo-Saxon theory “not only created a framework for defining *Frauen und Film*’s own theoretical position but also provided the groundwork for a future introduction of feminist film theory into course curricula in universities across the country” (165). Yet to a certain degree these theoretical paradigms were at odds with the task of increasing the visibility of the short, small gauge films of feminist practitioners. As Julia Lesage observes in the interview published in this issue, scholars became more engaged in ideological critique of mainstream cinema than in actually writing about experimental films. It did not help that the content of these original, experimental works was sometimes perceived as too radical or too personal for U.S. teaching institutions.

Since the 1990s, the discourse of academic film studies has moved away from the sorts of generic constructions of gender in popular film, as theorized by psychoanalytic semiotics, and adapted a range of approaches to understanding the physical, infrastructural role of new, emerging media and in particular, the mass media, in shaping culture, history, politics, cognition, and subjectivity. In Germany, a discussion on the archeology of media emerged in the late 1980s, partly inspired by the work of Friedrich A. Kittler. In the past three decades, multiple turns have been announced such as the “affective,” the “autobiographical,” the “archival,” and the “material,” all of which have doubtlessly changed how we discuss the discursive, social, and aesthetic interconnections between feminism and film. Most importantly, however, these new directions in film studies have been more conducive to analyzing small gauge formats. Recent edited volumes by Sue Clayton and Laura Mulvey (*Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and Experimental Film*

*in the 1970s*, 2017), Lucy Reynolds (*Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image: Contexts and Practices*, 2019, reviewed in this issue), Robin Curtis and Angelica Fenner (*The Autobiographical Turn in Germanophone Documentary and Experimental Film*, 2014), and Robin Blaetz (*Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, 2007), and monographs such as Genevieve Yue's *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (2020, reviewed in this issue) or Gabriele Schor's *Feminist Avant-Garde* (2017) attest to a renewed interest in the countercultural praxis of experimental filmmaking and the expansive and stunning body of work produced by feminist filmmakers which has been waiting to be archived, institutionalized, and theorized. It is no coincidence that over the past two decades feminist experimental film has had a renaissance as a subject of curatorial interest and archival practices, as some of the most prominent filmmakers and video artists in the German-speaking world have received or are receiving retrospectives: Ulrike Rosenbach (LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn, 2014), Valie Export (Close-Up Film Centre, London, 2016), Pipilotti Rist (Kunsthaus Zürich, 2016), and Hito Steyerl (Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2021). While some of these events are happening at arthouse cinemas, they are more often hosted at galleries and museums—the very institutions in which women filmmakers have long been staging their feminist versions of expanded cinema.

One impetus for this issue, then, is the need expressed by a growing number of film scholars for more research on the pluralistic praxis of feminist experimental filmmaking. Although the latter has long been partially erased by omission, it has nevertheless continued to thrive in a variety of institutional contexts and in different media despite the lack of commercial distribution. From the start, crucial questions about the intersections between capitalism, critical thought, and emancipatory artistic-activist practices were at the center of a feminist debate on the conditions of film production and reception. More recently critics and theorists have been asking questions pertaining to the systemic sources of inequality in the media industries, such as gendered pay disparities and the lack of representation. Another important impetus has been the unequal distribution of power cultivating

the conditions of sexual harassment and violence that have driven the #MeToo movement.

In this context, Giovanna Zapperi's article "From Acting to Action. Delphine Seyrig, *Les Insoumuses* and Feminist Video in 1970s France" provides an instructive historical perspective on the means and strategies feminist filmmakers have employed in the past to combat sexist practices in the industry. Using the example of French actress and political filmmaker Delphine Seyrig, Zapperi inquires into the visual constructions of traditional and resistant femininities in the acting profession. In particular, her paper demonstrates how Seyrig deconstructed her image as the "sophisticated, mysterious, and fetishized woman" (26) of French arthouse cinema by drawing our attention to the actress's lesser-known but rather trailblazing roles in films by feminist filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman, as well as Seyrig's much under-appreciated work as a feminist video maker in her own right. As Zapperi explains, Seyrig got involved in women's collectives and video production as a way to resist being received as the "personification of the diva's sophisticated femininity" (29). Moreover, her search for emancipatory strategies that would allow her to escape such a gendered and oversimplified image led Seyrig to the first-wave filmmaker collectives working collaboratively within the framework of the feminist movement in France: "Together with her close friends and video makers Carole Roussopoulos and Ioana Wieder, she became interested in the possibilities provided by new portable video technologies to explore women's experiences and struggles, as well as the material conditions of their lives, while at the same time questioning her own profession in transformative ways" (28). Zapperi thus surveys a series of works by Seyrig and the other members of their group, *Les Insoumuses*, all of which perform a radical critique of television or film as patriarchal institutions on the basis of experimental strategies such as on-location shooting, non-linear storytelling, or the creation of spectatorial discomfort. A major highlight of Zapperi's analysis is Seyrig's feature-length video documentary *Sois belle et tais-toi* (Be Pretty and Shut Up!, 1976), which is composed of interviews with twenty-seven actresses who discuss the material conditions of their commodified labor as *work*, as well as the male fantasies

structuring the film and television industries. As Zapperi argues, what makes this film so subversive and powerful is that it “transform[s] the camera into a listening device” while “turning the object of the gaze into the subject of the discourse [to dismantle] the traditional association between the female face and the cinematic spectacle” (40). According to Zapperi, this kind of emancipatory, activist work is a far cry from the standard practices of male-dominated, commercial film production in the 1970s and 80s.

The immediate and obvious concern with questions of representation is not the only way in which the articles collected here harken back to the first women’s film festivals with their declared goal to heighten the visibility of women’s film. They also revisit the interrelation between political activism, aesthetic practice, and film *theory*, which was always at the forefront of the now-historical feminist movement. Looking forward to the future of film studies in an age of media and queer studies and in a period of disparate intersectional and transnational (post-) feminisms, the articles presented here operate at a crossroads of theoretical paradigms. On the one hand, they acknowledge that feminist film theory does not occupy the same prominent position as it used to. On the other hand, they demonstrate that feminist experimental film has re-emerged as an aesthetic enterprise that is also inherently theoretical. Hence, they approach it as a form that reads itself, theorizes itself.

Dorothee Ostmeier’s analysis of three short films by the Cologne-based filmmaker duo Lena Sieckmann and Miriam Gossing is instructive in this regard. Exploring the “hyper-staged” character of Sieckmann and Gossing’s “aesthetic environments,” Ostmeier employs Timothy Morton’s notion of the *hyperobject* to demonstrate how the films’ multilayered audio and visual assemblages convey things as being profoundly ambiguous, suggestive of shifting and enigmatic realities (54). In the film *Souvenir* (2019), porcelain dog figures speak of love and marital relations but also testify to betrayal and broken relationships. The narrative reveals that the sailors who gifted the trinkets to their wives are cheating on them with prostitutes. Thus, not only do the dog souvenirs subvert the trope of canine fidelity, seen as hyperobjects, they also alert the widows to a sinister, hidden dimension of abandonment within their marriage. They become symbols of

disillusionment and indeed futility. In a similar way, wedding chapels in *Desert Miracles* (2015) invoke both the promise of a chance at romantic bliss and the elusiveness of marital vows straining under the weight of ubiquitous erotic and romantic temptation. In *Ocean Hill Drive* (2016), finally, shadow flickers cast by the whirling blades of wind turbines over a suburban neighborhood represent the coexistence of homeliness and haunting, domestic comfort and horror aesthetics. As an environmental phenomenon that is believed to impact the health of nearby communities, the turbines' strum of shadows and reflections figures as a more literal representation of Morton's hyperobjects. At the same time, Ostmeier observes, the shadow flickers "conjur[e] a meta-cinematographic reflection [that] also informs the ending of *Souvenir*" (68). After all, *Souvenir* illuminates and interrogates the mnemonic function not only of souvenirs but also of films—as complex, hyper-objective *film-souvenirs* (Meunier). Thus, not only does Sieckmann and Gossing's searching camera feature staged diegetic objects (porcelain dogs, wedding chapels, and shadow flickers) as hyperobjects, the artists' dynamic assemblage of visual and sound effects and voiceover narration also renders the films themselves as aesthetic hyperobjects that complicate traditional distinctions between filmmaking practice and film theory.

Sieckmann and Gossing belong to a new generation of artist filmmakers who are able to navigate with ease the changing media landscapes and shifting relations between film and digital production. From a formalist and to a certain degree also from a political standpoint, their work is diametrically opposed to the earlier experimental works of the 1970s and 80s, which were, as Giovanna Zapperi points out, "mostly understood as a tool for collective expression and less as a means for individual creativity, which may explain why its emergence was less closely associated with artistic practice" (32). Yet there is a significant generation in between that mediates between these two approaches by taking recourse to amateur technologies while also situating them in the tradition of the radical formal dislocations of materialist film. For this generation of third-wave feminist filmmakers, the popular amateur forms (Super 8 and to a certain degree 16mm) have yielded traditionally female-gendered themes like family and mothering,

personal relationships, and domestic life, which they subversively appropriate and transform as scenarios for their filmic interventions. Contrary to the cinema-*verité* style observational documentaries of the early women's movement, these filmmakers use amateur footage not to represent personal experience and (female) reality but to rewrite what Jean-Pierre Meunier has defined as the "home-movie attitude." In other words, these experimental films use or gesture toward the aesthetics of amateur films to disrupt our tendency to generalize and render present the matter of the home movie image. What unites these filmmakers is their vowed intention to break down the distinctions between fact and fiction to convey that home movies, like cinema *verité*, have been deceiving us all along. As Michelle Citron writes in her seminal work, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, "home movies represent how the person behind the camera chooses to film the way the person in front of the camera presents his or her 'self' . . . With parents and children, husbands and wives, the image often reproduces the power dynamic existing outside the frame" (13).

This strategy of questioning the "certainties about the representation of family relationships as well as established filmic forms" (78) is at the heart of Annette Brauerhoch's article, "Film Spaces, Memory Spaces: The Family House." Brauerhoch renders an incisive close reading of Recha Jungmann's feature-length film *Etwas tut weh* (*Something Hurts*, 1979) which "develops its own idiosyncratic hybrid form as documentary, autobiographical reflection, and contemplative temporality" (76) to engage a private examination of the filmmaker's family. The site of this examination is the family's dilapidated former residence, which resists or belies an easy inscription into the meshwork of private and communal memories. As Brauerhoch observes, the family fails to recognize or realize itself in the decaying property, raising questions about the interdependent forms and processes of memory work and spatial or material inherence: "What does it mean for the process of remembering the life of the family, when the space is not only unoccupied, but has also fallen into such disrepair that it has become a ruin?" (81-82). Brauerhoch draws on a range of theoretical perspectives to critically examine and contextualize this question, including Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological



investigation into the architecture of memory spaces (*The Poetics of Space*), Herbert Marcuse's critical social theory-informed analysis of the relationship between family and property, Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms and his conception of "aesthetic space," as well as critical concepts by Susan Sontag, Siegfried Kracauer, Gillian Rose, and Aleida Assmann. These theories offer a kaleidoscopic view into the family residence as a site of homeliness, social relations, history, and memory work: "In *Etwas tut weh*, family history becomes performative, not as the completion of a collection of facts, but rather as a procedural: memory work that leaves much left open; history as the incomplete," Brauerhoch observes (74). In that sense, Jungmann's film can also be understood as a commentary on the status of experimental film as an (unlikely) "institution" that has a long history of creating community (77). As Brauerhoch argues: "Here the fragments find a home not only in the aesthetic spaces that the film creates, but also in the cinema, in which this memory work is seen and shared together" (93).

A key characteristic of feminist experimental film is the open acknowledgment of its debt to (European) modernism's formal repertory, which has left film feminism "looking somewhat white and heterosexual," as Mulvey has noted (18). Since the 1970s, however, the radical, self-conscious practice of feminist filmmaking has moved forward to embrace and benefit from ideas associated with the politics of queer and race theory. In fact, this diverse corpus can be read as a chronicle of the transformation of feminist experimental film into "new queer cinema" (B. Ruby Rich) and other minor, queer, and feminist forms as they intersect with questions of race and class. Changed consumption practices (the move to handheld and private screens) and the shift from canonized channels of dissemination to social network communities have further widened the reception of cinema and our critical engagement with social and aesthetic practices that we may call feminist. One effect of the rise of "expanded cinema" which, in Valie Export's famous definition, expands "the commonplace form of film on the open stage or within a space," is that it brings film more directly into a public sphere that is inherently more diverse than the upper echelons of the white/male film industry.

Explicitly “carried out in order to discover and realise new forms of communication, the deconstruction of a dominant reality,” the work of feminist artists like Valie Export has increasingly included not only female and queer but also cultural or racial minority artists.

It is in this vein that Jenny Lin in her article “Poetics of Cross-Cultural Relation: Critical Performances by Artists kate-hers RHEE and Patty Chang” reclaims identity politics to make the case against a dismissal of biographical dimension in the name of theory. Through a series of compelling case studies, Lin interrogates how Asian American female artists “intervene into the still Western European/Anglo-American and male dominated terrains of modern and contemporary art” by drawing attention to processes of cultural construction through parody, absurdity, and subversive spectacle. Lin’s readings of performance works by artists kate-hers RHEE and Patty Chang elegantly reflect the delicate balance that Asian female artists walk between vocalizing discrimination and asserting their otherness, while also resisting being reduced to singular definable entities. This is particularly true in Germany, where Asians are often lumped into a single homogenous group that fails to keep their intersectional identities intact and distinct. Using Édouard Glissant’s concept of a “poetics of relation,” Lin demonstrates that RHEE and Chang utilize “a prismatic cross-cultural lens” to undo such “simplistic binaries” and to undermine easy constructions of “identity formation within transnational contexts” (95). For instance, in *The German Speaking Project* (2008) kate-hers RHEE humorously highlights the tension between her eagerness to learn German and her difficulty achieving linguistic mastery to subvert tropes of stereotypical American tourists and multicultural assimilation. Even more provocatively, RHEE uses parody and satire to challenge the fetishization of Asian women as sexual commodities in *Schicke Möpse* (2015–2016) and *The Chocolate Kiss* (2013–ongoing). As Lin demonstrates, the latter performance in particular reaches back to earlier works of the feminist avant-garde that employed direct audience engagement to introduce elements of confrontation and disruption.

The sexism and racism of Asian female stereotypes is also the subject of Patty Chang's video installation, *The Product Love*. As Lin explains, Chang employs actors playing mock translators and porn performers to lampoon Walter Benjamin's exoticizing infatuation with the Chinese American Hollywood movie star Anna May Wong whom the German philosopher encountered in person on the occasion of an interview he conducted and penned for the German literary review, *Die Literarische Welt*. In Lin's reading, Chang's video installation pairs "comical translations with sexual inuendo that extend to colonialist discourse . . . to highlight the impossibility of categorizing the actress using any fixed notion of identity." Consistent with Glissant's theory of creolization, the work performs Wong's "hybrid identity" (126).

By elegantly bridging German and U.S. film studies, Lin's article points a way toward a deeper and broader reflection on how the changing conditions of filmmaking and consumption in a global economy are transforming the disciplinary practices of German film studies. Together with the articles collected here, Lin's article also suggests that the questions of feminist and queer film theory remain urgent and will continue to inform our understanding of experimental feminist film, whether it circulates globally in the form of digital "poor images" (Hito Steyerl) or as precious analog and archival artifacts. Either way, it gives reason to hope that film theorists will continue to counteract the relative invisibility of feminist experimental film in relation to commercial cinema.

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