

## From Acting to Action: Delphine Seyrig, *Les Insoumuses*, and Feminist Video in 1970s France

Giovanna Zapperi  
Université de Genève

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*Mostly known as one of the leading actresses in 1960s-1970s French cinema, Delphine Seyrig was also a media and a feminist activist working collaboratively within the framework of the women's liberation movement. This article proposes to tackle Seyrig's involvement in feminist video production the 1970s and explores the continuum she inhabited, from the auteur cinema in which she was actress and muse, to the disobedient practices in which she was video maker, actress and activist. Seyrig's meditation on her work as an actress, as well as on the patriarchal structures sustaining the film industry, strongly resonates with recent debates prompted by the #metoo movement.*

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*Giovanna Zapperi is Professor of contemporary art history at the University of Geneva. She is the author of three books: L'artiste est une femme. La modernité de Marcel Duchamp [The Artist is a Woman. Marcel Duchamp's Modernity], Presses Universitaires de France 2012; with Alessandra Gribaldo, Lo schermo del potere. Femminismo e regime della visibilità [The Screen of Power. Feminism and the Regime of Visibility], Ombre Corte 2012, and Carla Lonzi. Un'arte della vita [Carla Lonzi: An Art of Life], Rome, Derive Approdi 2017. Together with Francesco Ventrella, she has recently edited the book Art and Feminism in Postwar Italy. The Legacy of Carla Lonzi (London, Bloomsbury 2021). With Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez she has curated the exhibition "Defiant Muses. Delphine Seyrig and Feminist Video Collectives in France, 1970s-1980s" (Madrid, Museo Reina Sofia, 2019-2020).*

I usually take interest in the form or style of the films I act in, yet I realize that as an actress, I have been expressing things that are not my own, but others. I feel a much greater involvement in this film. [...] It's not just being an actress, but acting within a context that means something to me personally. This never happened to me before. In the past I was always able to bring something I liked to the part I was playing, something between the lines. But now I feel I don't have to hide behind a mask, I can be my own size. It changes acting into action, what it was meant to be.

—Marsha Kinder

### **Delphine Seyrig's Becoming**

In an interview in which she discusses the role she played in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), Delphine Seyrig describes the shift that was occurring in her career as she began to work with women directors in the mid-1970s. Highlighting the political significance of working with women, Seyrig suggests that these new collaborations eventually enabled her to express the complexities of a woman's experience in her acting. This new understanding of acting as action described in the interview reveals Seyrig's ongoing endeavor to grant a new meaning to her profession and transform her acting skills into a political technique. This transformation infused her career with growing feminist awareness. Akerman's film portrays the alienating everyday life of a woman and tackles crucial questions related to maternity, sex work, and domestic labor that were at the center of feminist debates across Europe at the time. The film also succeeds in weaving together the formal and political avant-gardes that Seyrig had embodied in her career so far: from her early performance in Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) to the political use of video which became her major interest starting with her involvement in the feminist movement in the early 1970s. Throughout her entire career, Seyrig was concerned with the acting profession. She was particularly interested in questioning the visual construction of femininity, a fact that prompted her to turn to video, in search of emancipatory strategies.

Seyrig was born in Beirut to an intellectual family. Her mother, Hermine "Miette" de Saussure, was a scholar of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy and the niece of linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure. Her father, Henri Seyrig, was a renowned archaeologist whose positions included general director of antiquities of Syria and Lebanon, cultural attaché with the Free France delegation in the United States during World War II, and director of Musées de France (1960-1962) and of the French Institute of Archeology in Beirut. Delphine Seyrig lived in New York on several occasions, including an extended stay in the late 1950s, when she was married to the painter Jack Youngerman. The couple shared a building on the Coenties Slip in Lower Manhattan with artists Agnes

Martin, Ellsworth Kelly, and Robert Indiana. The role she played in Robert Frank and Albert Leslie's now cult film *Pull my Daisy* (1959) marks Seyrig's cinematic debut.

During the 1960s, Seyrig had built her career as a high-standard and intellectually sophisticated actress working with renowned film directors such as François Truffaut, Luis Buñuel, William Klein, and Alain Resnais, while at the same time developing a successful career on stage.<sup>1</sup> Seyrig became famous as the very incarnation of an idealized femininity via the role she played in Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*, one of the Nouvelle Vague's defining movies. In the film, she embodied the timeless image of a sophisticated, mysterious, and fetishized woman whose stylized gestures turned the actress into an icon of femininity. As Alexandre Moussa notes, contrary to the modern and sexually liberated heroines who figured in the work of filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard, in *Marienbad* "Seyrig presented herself as a direct descendant of the hieratic stars of the period of transition from silent to sound films" (Moussa 76). Whereas this role granted her the possibility to expand her career and reach a wider audience, the film soon became a sort of prison for Seyrig, who kept on being identified with the role she played in it. As a result of her work in *Marienbad*, she found herself mostly relegated to the role of the bourgeois and mysterious seductress (78). Under Resnais' fetishizing gaze, Seyrig's performance reactivates the imagery of the diva in the tradition of the silent movie as "a set of received images and constructed notions of femininity that have become so much a part of the collective unconscious that whether they have an essence in reality becomes irrelevant" (Ramirez 61).<sup>2</sup> Seyrig's sophistication and mannerism produces femininity as a divine apparition, a fact that resulted in her being viewed as a real diva.

Despite being mostly offered roles that reminded of her early performance, Seyrig sought to unpack such stereotyped images by turning her work as an actress into a site for the exploration of female identity. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, as an actress, video maker, and feminist, Seyrig delved into (and out of) female roles, impersonating a number of characters that either contradicted, exaggerated, or undermined her "Marienbad" image (Sykora). The

roles she played in films directed by women (Akerman, Marguerite Duras, Liliane de Kermadec, and Ulrike Öttinger) enabled her to significantly broaden the spectrum of her acting performances.

Seyrig was determined to shed the diva image that kept haunting her public persona. As a consequence, she was reluctant to open up about her private life with the press, which was characteristically eager to delve into her romantic life and family relations. This was not merely a defensive strategy to keep her life private, but rather a way to focus on the significance of her work in relation to her life. In a 1970 interview, for example, when the interviewer insisted on asking about the details of her private life, Seyrig stated that “[i]t’s not about what I am, it’s what I do that should be of interest” (Seyrig, “Delphine Seyrig: portrait par Claude Lanzmann”). To understand what she did, we need to question a number of categories such as “actress,” “activist,” “performer,” or “director,” which can hardly contain her activity, for although she took her profession very seriously, acting was just the point of departure for an ongoing process of personal and political becoming. Despite her being known primarily as one of the leading actresses of 1960s–70s French cinema, acting was not Seyrig’s sole activity. In the wake of the 1968 uprising, she became increasingly interested in questioning the social and cultural significance of her profession, especially from a woman’s perspective. By the early 1970s, she was involved in the women’s liberation movement and soon became a feminist media activist 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.

Seyrig’s political and creative trajectory is entwined with the media practices in which she was involved, ranging from self-reflexive performances to collaborative videos, which documented a number of political causes. She was also key in founding, with Roussopoulos and Wieder, the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in Paris in 1982, a self-organized institution aimed at

preserving the audiovisual memory of women's struggles. As film scholar Grace An observes, through Seyrig we can tell the history of 1970s feminism as a media history to which she contributed both as a producer of video works and in documenting the struggles of her time (An 51). Seyrig was not merely an actress who used her celebrity and privilege to promote a political cause, but was someone who continually tried to handle the complex entanglement of art, work, personal life, and politics. For Seyrig, creative expression intersected with a meditation on personal becoming, which involved an attempt to transform both life and work by way of political activism. In her view, politics entailed self-determination, alliances with other women, efforts to open up spaces and opportunities for immediate action, and an emphasis on relationships in opposition to competitive patriarchal structures.

It is no coincidence that Seyrig played Jeanne Dielman at a time in which she was interested in figuring out her profession as an actress, as well as the social roles in which women's lives seemed to be trapped, both on and off screen. The year 1975 is crucial in her trajectory, not only because she starred as the leading female character in three important films directed by women,<sup>3</sup> but also because it marked the zenith of her involvement in feminist collectives and video production. Seyrig openly addressed the power structures in which she was enmeshed as a woman *and* as an actress, for in her view the two mostly coincided. Her whole trajectory is thus marked by a continuum between the actress and the activist, two polar positions which she both embodied throughout her career. From the personification of the diva's sophisticated femininity to the disobedient practices of her collective experimental video work, her life and career exemplifies the interweaving of life and politics.

In what follows, I propose to tackle Seyrig's involvement in feminist video productions during the 1970s in order to explore the continuum she inhabited, from the *auteur cinema* in which she participated as both actress and muse, to the disobedient practices in which she figured as a video maker, actress, and activist. At the center of this continuum stands Seyrig's struggle against the film industry's patriarchal structures, which motivated her most personal project, the feature-

length video documentary *Sois belle et tais-toi* (*Be Pretty and Shut Up*, 1976). In this ground-breaking video, twenty-three actresses from across France, Canada, and the United States discuss their work experiences and speak up against the industry's pervasive misogyny. Another key talking point in the interviews is the actresses' desire for different female roles beyond the stereotyped images that they were supposed to interiorize as women and actresses. The significance of this video lies not only in its striking topicality for our contemporary “#MeToo” era, but also in how it portrays actresses as political subjects. The accounts of their personal experiences expose the material inequalities, as well as the male fantasies structuring the whole industry. I propose to resituate this documentary within the framework of the collective project in which Seyrig was involved as a feminist and as a video maker, specifically as a member of the video collective *Les Insoumuses*, along with Roussopoulos and Wider. In their videos, these women experimented with a distinctively feminist working method that promoted a collective self-representation based on mutual care and solidarity. They transformed the camera into a listening device and their productions overturned television's tendency to objectify the person (the woman) on the screen, proposing instead to use video as an agent of political struggle and a means for emancipation.

### **Portable Video and the Feminist Movement in France**

It was a timely coincidence that portable video technologies became available in France in the aftermath of 1968, while the country experienced unprecedented upheavals coupled with new forms of collective organization. Within this context, video quickly became an important tool for activists who were interested in documenting the struggles and providing autonomous information in defiance of television's biased narratives. Whereas portable video technology was advertised and conceived to be used in the private realm of family life and in tourism,<sup>4</sup> as Ros Murrey observes, it was quickly transposed to the public sphere as a means to participate and act from within the struggles. Activists were interested in the new medium not for its capacity to secure intimate memories but because it enabled them to erase and record again over the same tape via instant playback, a feature

that differentiated portable video from other visual technologies (Murrey, "Raised Fist" 96). Video thus provided a sense of immediacy, it enabled relations based on mutual trust between the filming person and the ones that were filmed, as opposed to the hierarchical apparatus of the television industry. Sony's lightweight and easily transportable Portapak also entailed a reconfiguration of proximate, bodily relationships with regard to the presence of the camera. The shift from the private towards the public sphere, and the ability to foster horizontal relations, were equally crucial aspects that prompted women to turn to video as an agent of emancipation.

Seyrig started to use a Portapak camera around 1974 after participating in training sessions organized by activist filmmaker Carole Roussopoulos. At the time, Roussopoulos taught cinema at the newly founded Université de Vincennes in Paris where she was developing a series of workshops specifically addressed to women (Fleckinger, "Une révolution du regard" 105). Along with Jean-Luc Godard, Roussopoulos was one of the first to own the Portapak video system commercialized in France in the late 1960s. Despite her lack of technical knowledge in filmmaking, Roussopoulos embraced video in the early 1970s in order to capture the political urgencies of the moment, regardless of how refined the finished product would turn out to be. Together with her husband, Paul Roussopoulos, she founded the militant video collective Vidéo Out, which gave voice to oppressed and socially excluded groups. Their first videos thus documented a series of strikes and demonstrations in France. Their friendship with Jean Genet also brought them to visit Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, and then to Algeria, where they became acquainted with members of the PLO, the Black Panther Party, and other revolutionary groups (100). Roussopoulos became interested in feminist politics around 1971, when a group of women involved with the women's liberation movement asked her to help them edit the very first feminist video in France, *Grève de femmes à Troyes (Women's Strike in the City of Troyes, 1971)*. When she later met Seyrig, Roussopoulos had already established a reputation as an activist video maker involved in the women's movement.

As Anne-Marie Duguet points out, the emergence of portable video technology in France coincided with the beginnings of the women's liberation movement: women's productions began to circulate at the beginning of the 1970s, when the acronym MLF (Mouvement de Libération des Femmes) first appeared (90). Video was 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. Women were indeed interested in the possibility of documenting their struggles and producing collective self-representations that refused authorship and sought to promote an autonomous media practice not already subjected to male knowledge and expertise. Video collectives refused to think of their production within the conventional categories of art or film; instead, they wanted to break away from established formats while producing radical critiques of the ideological apparatuses of television and cinema. Television in particular quickly became a privileged target, especially with respect to its misogyny and stereotyped representations of women (see Jeanjean). Generally speaking, video productions participated in a context in which new portable video technologies were largely appropriated by women in a gesture of disobedience and emancipation.

Following their first training with Roussopoulos, by the mid-1970s Ioana Wieder and Seyrig, together with Claude Lefèvre-Jourde, Monique Duriez, and Josée Constantin, organized the collective *Les Muses s'amuse* (The Muses Have Fun). Wieder, Seyrig, and Roussopoulos soon transformed the group into *Les Insoumuses* (a play on words that combines *insoumise*—unruly or disobedient—and *muse*; it can be translated as “Disobedient Muses” or “Defiant Muses”), which became the name under which they produced and edited a series of videos combining humor, social critique, and the construction of a feminist gaze. These names point at a possible subversion and subjectivation of the figure of the muse, considered as a passive source of inspiration, directly referring to the asymmetrical relation between actresses and directors that defines gender roles in the film industry.<sup>5</sup> Their agitprop interventions *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* (*Maso and Miso Go Boating*, with Nadja Ringart, 1976), a title that playfully refers



to Jacques Rivette's film *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (*Céline and Julie Go Boating*, 1974)—in which a misogynist television broadcast is appropriated, deconstructed, and subverted—and *SCUM Manifesto* (1976)—based on a performative reading of Valerie Solanas' famous text—enact forms of parody and disturbance via editing, appropriation, and performance to enable new modes of media critique.<sup>6</sup> Their subversive and playful irreverence and DIY approach allowed the Insoumuses to perform a radical critique of television as a patriarchal institution. Their collaborative work is exemplary of an emancipatory use of video as part of a shared political agenda: their video productions show how visual and media practices emanating from the experiences of the women's movement allow for a rethinking of the image and the gaze in the context of a struggle for autonomy. Visual pleasure is thus replaced by the invention of new forms of collective agency and media critique.

Roussopoulos' videos from the early 1970s and her collaborations with Seyrig and Wieder offer the opportunity to access the multiple struggles in which they participated, primarily around questions of sexuality, reproduction, and sex work, but also the rights of political prisoners, migrant workers' strikes, or the opposition against the Vietnam War. Moreover, their productions are exemplary of a disobedient media practice calling for new forms of self-organization. Accordingly, video was not merely a tool for documenting the struggles and *prises de parole*, but rather a way to take part in, express, and galvanize the latter (Fleckinger, "Une caméra à soi" 36). The aim of these tapes was to provide counter-information, and to promote analysis and debates from within the fight. Their circulation and distribution were closely connected with the political actions in which the images were filmed, and the tapes were often watched and discussed on the spot. Sometimes the footage was erased and filmed again, if the participants were not convinced of its accuracy or legitimacy. Carole Roussopoulos' approach to video had a huge impact on Seyrig's own appropriation of the camera in the framework of her preoccupation with the film industry.

Videos were usually produced in close collaboration with the subjects they depicted. In an interview with Héléne Fleckinger, Roussopoulos highlights what

she calls an *éthique du tournage*, an ethics of filming that is also a form of empowerment (Fleckinger, “Une révolution du regard” 112). For Roussopoulos, the footage she produced belonged to the filmed persons as much as to herself. She chose to approach only the subjects who were turning against their oppression, that is, those people who were fully aware of what was happening to them. They are not staged as victims but as subjects who understand the possibility provided by video to communicate with others who are experiencing the same oppression. Roussopoulos’ videos are not concerned with formal rigor, their aim is not to convey emotional responses, but rather to raise consciousness and promote dialogue and solidarity in a way that would link together the speaking person, the listening camera, and the spectator watching from a distance.

An example of these videos, *Le FHAR* (1971), provides a hint of her understanding of video as a political tool. The video documents an early meeting of the *Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Homosexual Action Front), a group founded in 1971 by gay and lesbian students and activists in the wake of the 1968 protests. After Roussopoulos attended one of the group’s weekly meetings, she was asked by its members to film the May 1 demonstration that marked their first public appearance as part of the traditional May Day parade. She then showed the resulting footage at the next meeting and filmed the subsequent discussion. The resulting video, *Le FHAR*, edits together scenes from the demonstration and the intense debates that followed their screening. Images of street protests are juxtaposed with sequences in which the subjects filmed in the struggle address the camera: Roussopoulos hands the microphone over to the speaking person, thus turning the camera into a listening device. Here, as in other videos, the form of the “video portrait” becomes a way to convey the immediacy and the relational dimension involved in the filming, while at the same time providing counter-information on subjects that were too controversial for public television. *Le FHAR* is also significant for how it conveys the filmmaker’s bodily presence by shifting in and out of focus, avoiding any kind of linear representation of how the meeting and the demonstration unfolded, and choosing instead to

capture moments of speech and assembly without providing factual information about what one sees.

Another significant video, produced by Roussopoulos in close collaboration with Seyrig, is *Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent* (*Lyon Prostitutes Speak*, 1975), which is groundbreaking for its intimate portrayal of sex workers defining their struggle in their own terms (Murrey, “Raised Fist” 110). The video depicts a group of sex workers occupying a church in Lyon in order to demand the end of arbitrary arrests and fines, greater freedom, and more respect from the police. Both Roussopoulos and Seyrig were involved in supporting the rights of the sex workers, an issue that strongly resonated with Seyrig’s own acting career, as the subject of prostitution was also at the center of Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielmann*, which was released that same year. Whereas she did not directly take part in filming *Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent*, later that year Seyrig would participate in the *États généraux de la prostitution* (Prostitutes’s Estates General) in Paris as a speaker and video maker.<sup>7</sup> As Roussopoulos underlines, their understanding of the issue of sex work was greatly informed by Kate Millett’s *The Prostitution Papers*, which is based on the idea that feminists need to listen to sex workers in order to build political alliances (Fleckinger, “Une révolution du regard” 104).

Sex work is one of the most controversial and divisive topics in feminist debates, from which sex workers themselves are mostly excluded. *Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent* provides an opportunity to listen to what they have to say about the material conditions in which they work and live. Most important, the video shows that alliances between sex workers and feminist activists are possible. While the striking sex workers were initially suspicious about being filmed, they eventually allowed Roussopoulos inside the church when they realized that being filmed was a way for them to communicate with the outside. The Portapak system allowed for interviews to be filmed inside the church and then shown on the street, where passersby could gather and listen to what the strikers had to say. The sex workers changed their mind about being filmed as soon as they understood that, in Roussopoulos’ hands, video was not meant to produce images of them—with the attendant fear of being identified, objectified, and captured in voyeuristic

representation—but to amplify their message. For about one week, they accepted to be filmed during morning sessions, and then, together with Roussopoulos, they would watch and chose the footage to be shown outside, where a number of monitors were installed on the sidewalk adjacent to the church (Roussopoulos n.p.). The final version, edited upon her return to Paris, assembles footage filmed inside and outside of the church, thus suggesting an alternative mapping of the private, the public, and the political. Seyrig's video mediates between different spaces while emphasizing the sex workers' voice and political demands within the public arena.

### **The Life and Work of Actresses**

In 1974 Seyrig filmed her very first video, *Inês*, conceived as a call for action for the liberation of Inês Etienne Romeu, a Brazilian political prisoner who had been incarcerated and tortured for a hundred days in the infamous Petropolis prison. Seyrig was a member of the international committee demanding her liberation. In the video she directly addresses General Ernesto Geisel, then Brazilian president, denouncing his responsibility in crimes against women. The video was screened at the Women's International Congress in Frankfurt, Germany (16-17 November 1974), where a resolution demanding Romeu's liberation was adopted.<sup>8</sup> However, despite the activist context, *Inês* seems very remote from the irreverent and DIY attitude of the videos she would subsequently produce with the Insoumuses. *Inês* stages a painfully theatrical re-creation of the torture endured by Romeu (performed by an unidentified Brazilian actress) that seems to owe more to Seyrig's knowledge in the realm of stage performance than to the activist vocabulary that she would elaborate with her friends Roussopoulos and Wieder. Following a prologue in which Inês Romeu's picture is accompanied by Seyrig's voice denouncing her imprisonment and the violence she had to endure, an excruciating fifteen-minute sequence stages the scene of the torture. The torturer's voice-over insulting the woman, in tandem with the music that was actually played while Romeu was tortured (each prisoner had their own song), produce an intensification of the spectator's discomfort and emotional involvement in the

scene. Perhaps *Inês* can be understood as an early attempt to look for a possible convergence between Seyrig's impending video activism and her on-going concern with her work as an actress, thus connecting her two major fields of inquiry at the time.

Seyrig's training took place in Paris and in New York, where she moved in 1956 with her husband, the American painter Jack Youngerman, and where she attended classes at the Actor's Studio. Lee Strasberg's method was key in Seyrig's understanding of acting as a way to employ the actor's body to infuse life into the script, which she once designated as a "death sequence" (Seyrig, "Interview with Eliane Victor" n.p.). Moreover, from the 1960s forward Seyrig understood her profession as an "oblique way" to say what she thought, or to say things she would not dare saying in public, thus bridging her work and her need to claim an autonomous voice (Brangé 279). As her involvement in the feminist movement unfolded, she came to an understanding of her profession in terms of a "desire to change identity, to not be restrained to the one identity society has trapped us into," as she explains in a letter to her son (Seyrig, "Letter to Duncan Youngerman" 220-21). Seyrig wrote these lines from Brussels, where she was shooting Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, a role that represented the more spectacular change in identity in her acting career, as it provided the opportunity to play a woman that was very distant from her own life experience.<sup>9</sup> The self-reflexive quality of Seyrig's acting, in conjunction with her political involvement in the women's liberation movement, prompted Seyrig to delve into a deeper analysis of the actress's labor and role in society.

In 1972, the shooting of Joseph Losey's *A Doll's House*, a film in which Seyrig starred with Jane Fonda, had provided the first opportunity to openly raise questions about cinema's integral misogyny. While on location in Norway for the shooting, the two actresses engaged in a series of arguments with the director and his screenwriter, David Mercer, who had penned the adaptation of Ibsen's play. Fonda and Seyrig found that Mercer's version missed the original text's acute insights into the psychology of the female characters and proposed a rather simplistic and stereotyped adaptation. The shooting became highly antagonistic

and gender roles were renegotiated while the struggle around the representation of women unfolded. Unfortunately, the conflict ended at the expenses of the two actresses, who didn't succeed in their attempt to rewrite the scenario, and especially for Seyrig, whom Losey later accused of having been the lone source of trouble (Ciment 371-75).

The experience of *A Doll's House* has an important role in Seyrig's fight against inequality in the film industry, while at the same time allowing her to frame her previous thoughts on the relation between life and labor in political terms. Significantly, Seyrig's confrontation with the power relations shaping the actress' status and labor coincides with her discovery of video, as she recounts to feminist philosopher Françoise Collin: "[Video] has been for me a possibility to make cinema without asking anybody else's help . . . a revelation, an enormous pleasure, an enormous revenge against the fact that I am called at 6 a.m. to have my hair done, my make-up done and that we are shooting, and that I have to be like this and like that" (Collin 79-80).

The most remarkable outcome of Seyrig's engagement with video as a way to express an autonomous voice within her own profession is her 1976 documentary *Sois belle et tais-toi* (Be Pretty and Shut Up!). This feature-length documentary is a collective reflection on the material conditions in which actresses work, and on the film industry's tendency to contain women's agency within pre-established parameters. The choice of the title, which refers to the demands placed on actresses during film production, illuminates a structural power differential inside the film industry. As we have seen, Seyrig herself had experienced these mechanisms in her work as an actress, for example in the limited range of roles she was offered, or in the way her acting tended to be read only as participating in the construction of a conventional female imagery, referring to her early performance in *Last Year in Marienbad*. In keeping with Seyrig's self-reflectiveness, *Sois belle et tais-toi* stitches together the filmed testimonies of twenty-four actresses she interviewed in France and the United States in 1975 and 1976. These include Jane Fonda, Maria Schneider, Anne Wiazemsky, and others. The choice of these actresses was motivated by Seyrig's own network and her

many encounters with actor colleagues, especially during her trip to Los Angeles with Carole Roussopoulos. Notwithstanding this somewhat casual casting, Seyrig wanted to explore the labor conditions and the subject position of the actress in the film industry, television, and theater. The editing avoids any hierarchy between the actresses despite their different degrees of celebrity, as some enjoyed real stardom, such as Fonda or Schneider, or at least worked in *auteur* or underground cinema, such as Viva, Juliet Berto or Anne Wiasemsky, while others were either lesser known or, as we learn during the film, were often assigned to secondary and stereotyped roles.

The film's structure borrows the form of the "video portrait" from Roussopoulos, who was actually operating the camera during the shooting. However, unlike most of her other videos, *Sois belle et tais-toi* creates the sense of an on-going conversation, emphasizing the need for mutual support and potential for action. The film's editing is not organized as a linear succession of video portraits, it rather stitches together fragments of each interview in a way that conveys the image of a collective speech act. Its development is organized around the questions asked by Seyrig and the rambling directions taken by each conversation. Although Seyrig never appears on screen, we hear her inimitable voice asking questions and engaging in the discussion. The fact that the filmmaker was an actress produces a sense of intimacy and mutual understanding. Her interjections act as the thread sewing the film together. The actresses are mostly captured in a private setting, filmed with a steady camera, and obviously deprived of the complex paraphernalia (lighting, make-up, etc.) necessary to elevate them to the status of the filmic object to be looked at. *Sois belle et tais-toi* ruptures the screen's illusionistic representation in order to convey the material conditions of the actress' labor, beyond the constructed image on screen. By turning the object of the gaze into the subject of the discourse, Seyrig dismantles the traditional association between the female face and the cinematic spectacle (Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* 40-41).

Throughout the documentary, actresses share their experiences with structural sexism in the film industry. They discuss issues of gender stereotypes

and ageism, exploitation, and dependence. They denounce their frustration with roles that have nothing to do with the life of a woman, and the solitude in which their characters are trapped much in the same way as they are often lonely during the shooting. At the same time, they also voice a shared desire for change and for establishing new connections among women. Filmed decades before the #MeToo movement made sexual assault in the film industry mainstream news, “casting couch” issues and being sexually harassed in a direct physical way do not come up as central topics. Nevertheless, the film remains topical for its ability to give a collective account of the structures of sexism governing the movie industry.

*Sois belle et tais-toi* underlines a shared experience of alienation, in which the subject is caught in multiple constraining devices that are activated both on and off the screen. The film opens with actresses reacting to Seyrig’s question about their professional choice: would they have wished to become actors if they were boys? Unsurprisingly, all seem to agree on the fact that men have so many more opportunities in life that they would have certainly taken different paths, because “life would have been freer,” as Millie Perkins puts it. While some actresses suggest that the path towards other, more “valuable” careers such as director or producer would have been open, others muse on the freedom to move around and travel the world without fearing sexual assaults, as Juliet Berto suggests. Mallory Millet-Jones indicates a more structural relation between womanliness and her becoming an actress. She suggests that “one of the reasons why I can act so well is because I am a woman, because women are trained to seduce and charm” (*Sois belle*). In other words, whereas femininity needs to be endlessly performed and repeated according to a set of rules, actresses find themselves in the situation of constantly superimposing their professional skills with their own femininity. What emerges from this first exchange is the notion that to become an actress was no real choice, given the fact that women have such limited choices in life anyway.

As the conversation unfolds, different voices address the stereotyped representation of women provided by the film industry and the lack of diversity in the roles available to women: Jane Fonda, for example, talks about her very first



leading role in a Hollywood comedy where she was supposed to play a “ridiculous woman,” a cheerleader who only cared about finding a man, a woman “who actually does not exist in reality.” Louise Fletcher describes how she was confined to Western movies because producers considered her too tall for other filmic genres, as Westerns were the only films where male actors were tall enough for her to look smaller. Madie Norman describes the even more limited range of roles available for African-American actresses: maids and slaves “in the old times,” and now social workers, nurses, and mothers, with the only alternative being the Blaxploitation industry, of which she disapproves. Anne Wiasemsky points at the tendency in the film industry to identify actresses with their role in the cinema, as she experienced in Jean-Luc Godard’s *La Chinoise*, thus provoking an “identity crisis”—“*la Chinoise*: that’s not me,” she says—which resonates with Fonda’s previous description of her alienation while looking at her own image in the mirror before filming (*Sois belle*). While frustration and complaint seem inevitable, the exchanges also articulate a collective critique of the “rules of the game” to which actresses are subjected in their work, one of the most obvious being the formal interdiction to speak for themselves (Lesage 519).

While women seem to be confined to few roles, a wider range of possibilities is offered to their male counterparts. Not only are male actors not subject to ageism, they are also unmistakably the real protagonists of a film because, as Viva puts it, “the film’s object is always the relationship between two men.” The latter are often paired with a single female character, whose role is precisely to confirm that, as Mallory Millet-Jones continues, “the real human relation is between the two men.” The fact that the film industry seems so focused on homosocial interactions, by narrating “love stories” between men, affects not just the cultural and social imaginary, but also the material conditions in which women work. As Maria Schneider explains, an actress is constantly in search of male approval, because the industry is basically led by men: the great majority of producers, directors, screenwriters, agents, and even the press, are all male. No wonder then if they produce “*des sujets pour les hommes*” (topics for men). She also recalls how during the infamous shooting of Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris* (1972),

no one discussed her character with her or explained the film's narrative, whereas Bertolucci and Marlon Brando were constantly exchanging notes: "They made the film together," she concludes (*Sois belle*).

The male romance, which emerges as the most pervasive and enduring cinematic trope, needs as its counterpart the constant debasement, isolation, and marginalization of a female character. Her role is, among other things, to secure the heterosexual framework of the narrative. This leads to one of the most remarkable sections in the film, where Seyrig asks the interviewees if it has ever occurred to them to play scenes in which they interact with other female characters in a friendly way. The fact that most of them never had such an opportunity is hardly surprising, given that the film industry privileges relations between men and forbids the depiction of female friendship. Moreover, as Candy Clark recalls, she hardly ever had any scene with other women, as there are so few female roles anyway. When interactions between women appear on screen, the script makes sure that these are based on competition, aggression, and hostility, the only emotions that female characters are authorized to express towards other women. The result is that the character's loneliness and lack of friends parallels the actress' isolation during the shooting.

The only two notable exceptions from the 1970s are Juliet Berto's role in Jacques Rivette's *Julie et Céline vont en bateau*—a film Maria Schneider "would have loved to do," as she confesses—and Jane Fonda's character in Fred Zinneman's *Julia* (1977). Given their exceptional status, it changes very little about the negative portrayal of the film industry's treatment of women and other minority groups. The shift that occurs in these two films might relate to the emergence of the women's movement. This fact surfaces at times in the conversations, as most of the actresses affirm that a change is necessary and that the women's movement might initiate a more radical transformation. Marie Dubois, for example, discusses the need for women to write female roles themselves, a claim that echoes Ellen Burstyn's observation that, due to the women's movement, gender stereotypes now seem less acceptable in the film industry.

Despite the fact that the documentary is predicated on a painful deconstruction of the inherent bias against women in the film industry and on its devastating effects on women's lives and careers, *Sois belle et tais-toi* also provides a framework for emancipation. The film's empowering effect derives from its ability to articulate the singularity of each woman's voice with a growing collective awareness. Also, and most importantly, the film offers the possibility to understand the actresses' work as *work*, and to reclaim it in their own terms (An 67). It is precisely because their labor is recognized as such, detached from the illusionistic apparatus that is the cinema, that actresses are presented as political subjects. Moreover, as a collective speech act, the film brings to mind the women's groups that greatly facilitated the production of feminist autobiographical video work in the 1970s both in the United States and in France.<sup>10</sup> Similarly to what happened in these groups, the women involved in the discussions and testimonies assembled in *Sois belle et tais-toi* are able to name a previously unarticulated knowledge, which therefore becomes political. These groups, where women discussed the terms of their oppression and shared their life experience, served to reveal the political meaning of what each woman was experiencing at an individual level, much in the same way as it happens in *Sois belle et tais-toi*.<sup>11</sup> In the video, the representation of a female gaze directed toward oneself ruptures both the actress's isolation and the traditional association between women and narcissism, women's status in representation as the object of the male gaze.<sup>12</sup> Instead, it opens up the possibility of a different becoming that is grounded in a feminist media critique and appropriation.

### **Conclusion: From Life to Politics, and Back Again**

During an interview, as she mused on the meaning of *Sois belle et tais-toi*, Seyrig stated that engaging in this project was for her a way to better understand her life and how she had become herself. When, as a young woman, she undertook to become an actress, she had imagined that this would have allowed her to express herself, which eventually proved to be wrong: "Much later and following the consciousness raising of the feminist movement, I have realized that I had never

expressed myself. I had expressed an image written by men” (Seyrig qtd in Fleckinger, “Cinéma et vidéo saisis par le féminisme” 811).<sup>13</sup> While acting remained her primary activity during the 1970s and 1980s, and obviously a way to make a living, it was directing that allowed Seyrig to express herself in ways that her acting career was unable to accommodate. It was indeed thanks to her involvement in feminist video that Seyrig could address the questions surrounding her life and career. Moreover, from the mid-1970 on, feminism oriented her acting choices in a decisive way, especially as she became more committed to women’s cinema, while at the same time she found herself being blacklisted by some mainstream producers because of her political activism, not to mention the fact that there were fewer roles for women over forty. At the same time, the collective project of the *Insoumuses* took a specific and personal direction in her political and existential inquiry into her own profession. *Sois belle et tais-toi* centers on the actress’ subjectivity and how an actress’s life is entwined with her work, for the film demonstrates that all actresses are acutely aware of the fact that, as women, they find themselves in the situation of playing a role in their everyday life. The women’s movement and her use of video prompted by her encounter with Roussopoulos had an empowering effect on Seyrig, motivating the actress to leave her isolation behind and to understand the social and cultural significance of her labor. Therefore it was ultimately her politics that allowed Seyrig to make sense of her existential search.

In this respect, her documentary participates in the politics of feminist video as a strategy of media appropriation, in which the field of representation was understood as a crucial battlefield. *Les Insoumuses*’ multiple and active contestations of the implication of audio-visual media in promoting gender normativity became the ground upon which to build new alliances and solidarities. In the videos they produced collectively, the deconstruction of gender stereotypes parallels a shared project of becoming subjects, which is based on the act of reclaiming an autonomous gaze and voice. Most importantly, their understanding of working and living together was predicated on the attempt to take care and listen to one another. This didn’t mean that their aim was to speak with one united voice,

they rather wanted to oppose the patriarchal impulse to single women out and separate them from each other. Life experiences were thus rearticulated within this collective context, enabling Seyrig and her fellow actresses and activists to subvert the power relations that play out in visual representation. Ultimately, this kind of activist work also transformed their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of Seyrig's acting career in theater and cinema see Brangé. See also Sykora.

<sup>2</sup> On the notion of the diva see also Bronfen and Staumann.

<sup>3</sup> Along with Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, Seyrig also played the leading female role in Marguerite Duras' *India Song* (1975) and Liliane de Kermadec's *Aloïse* (1975). The three films were presented at the Cannes film festival that year.

<sup>4</sup> As film scholar Ros Murrey writes, the Sony Portapak which arrived in France in 1968 "was initially intended by its manufacturers to be used by families and tourists interested in portable technology that would allow them to capture weddings, anniversaries, and special outings on tape. Portapak marketing materials in the 1970s make this family emphasis clear" (Murrey, "Raised Fist" 96).

<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, the collective's emphasis on the idea of subverting the muse brings us back to Seyrig's previous role as Alain Resnais' "muse" and the typical actress-director relationship she had experienced in the early 1960s.

<sup>6</sup> *SCUM Manifesto* and *Maso and Miso go boating* are probably the most widely viewed videos of the 1970s feminist movement in France. For an in-depth analysis see Murrey, "Cutting Up Men?".

<sup>7</sup> The footage filmed on this occasion is lost. An article published in the newspaper *France Soir* (3 July 1975) announced that "*Delphine Seyrig filme les états généraux de la prostitution*".

<sup>8</sup> The video was conceived in close collaboration with Brazilian actress Norma Bengell and filmed in Régis Debray's home. I wish to thank Ioana Wieder for sharing her recollection of this event.

<sup>9</sup> As Babette Mangolte recalls, casting "Seyrig as Dielman was an example of reverse casting": the actress who was mostly identified as an emblem of sophistication was chosen precisely because the film aimed at "communicating more than realism" (Mangolte 359).

<sup>10</sup> See Julia Lesage, "The Political Aesthetic of the Feminist Documentary Film."

<sup>11</sup> As she recounts in a TV broadcast with Simone de Beauvoir, Seyrig had herself participated in women's groups as early as 1969. De Beauvoir, Simone, Delphine Seyrig, and Christine Delphy. *Aujourd'hui la vie*, Antenne 2, 14 May 1985.

<sup>12</sup> See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

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<sup>13</sup> "Or, en fait, je me suis aperçue beaucoup plus tard et avec la prise de conscience du mouvement féministe que je ne m'étais jamais exprimée. J'avais exprimé une image écrite par les hommes."

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