

**Review Essay****Lucy Reynolds, *Women Artists, Feminism, and the Moving Image*.  
Bloomsbury, 2019**

Jillian Vasko

University of Toronto

---

*Jillian Vasko is an experimental filmmaker and PhD candidate at the Cinema Studies Institute at the University of Toronto. Her SSHRC-funded dissertation research reconceptualizes contemporary notions of 'value' and 'labor' as they structure prevailing accounts of the relation between bodies, media, and capital through a study of ASMR and online pornography. She is devoted to anti-colonial, intersectional, and creative methodologies.*

---

Timely, generative, and delightfully indiscriminate in scope, Lucy Reynolds' anthology *Women Artists, Feminism, and the Moving Image: Contexts and Practices* is an assemblage of essays and artist/curator interviews exploring a range of feminist authors and works of moving image media. Pursuing unresolved questions and new theoretical directions that distinguish the terrain of contemporary feminist media studies, the essays and interviews herein tackle the occasionally thorny legacy presented by feminist studies and histories in a moment in which the notion of fixed gender is increasingly unsettled. This collection both expresses and seeks to assuage the anxiety that practitioners of feminist theory are prone to in the wake of the decades-long critical shift favoring intersectional analysis that focuses on the convergence, rather than discrete areas, of race, gender-identity, class, ability, sexuality, citizenship status and so on. As such, the volume pivots around a query that haunts feminism's overlapping disciplines, implicitly asking: "is gender *still* a useful category for analysis?" (Scott).<sup>1</sup> In addressing the various lacunae that have plagued feminist interpretive frameworks and forms of activism, and responses to them, from their origins, the chapters herein embrace moving image artists who take myriad positions with regards to the labels "woman artist" and "feminist." The volume showcases artists from the avowed to the ambivalent, to those that prefer not to organize their oeuvres around their gender or politics. Focalizing the privileged role of feminism(s) in the study,

reception, and production of all manner moving image media, the collection usefully eschews established divisions between film, video, and other moving image forms.

Impressively, the book opens with a foreword by Laura Mulvey, whose ground-breaking 1975 polemic “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” we have to thank for ushering in the practice of feminist analysis in cinema studies. In her foreword, Mulvey reflects on her own genesis as artist and theorist, detailing the formative conjunction of the experimental film movement and feminist activism in the UK in the 1970s. Expounding on Lis Rhodes’ metaphor of the “crumpled heap” of women’s film history from the poem that serves as a prelude to the collection, Mulvey observes how the disjointed chronologies that constitute feminist histories are echoed by the avant-gardist rejection of narrative and linear progression common to feminist political aesthetics. The proceeding essays productively wrestle with the dialectical tensions between progress and stasis that typify the current state of feminist political struggle and art evoked here by the foremother of feminist cinema studies.

In her comprehensive preface to the volume, “Raising Voices,” Reynolds diligently outlines the nexus of feminist modes of analysis and their development in relation to studies of cinema and the moving image. Reynolds, like Mulvey, returns to the critical matrix of feminist activism, filmmaking, and intellectual activity that distinguished the 1970s and Second Wave Feminism. Reynolds reminds us of the import of revisionist history in this early period in establishing the connection between feminism and film practice. In so doing, she paints a genealogy of some of the many milestones of feminist media studies across the decades that helped develop the field as we know it today. Reynolds writes that the movement of the 1970s, when feminist scholarship and film studies first merged, was “fueled by the desire to bring to light and advocate for artists passed over by cinema’s male oriented histories” (3). She traces a similar intent to “set the record straight” in more of-the-moment feminist publications that focus not just on the history of cinema proper, but video and other moving image media (3). Significantly, Reynolds evokes the “double bind of marginality” that women artists working in the ‘minor’

modes of the avant-garde and experimental practices encountered and continue to encounter as they seek to produce works not simply reduced to interpretations predicated on their gender or politics (6). As an antidote to this reductivism, Reynolds suggests we can conceive of feminism in the work of women artists as “a discursive texture rather than a more overt activism, open for the scholar and the reader’s interpretation alongside the formative contexts and ‘occupational identity’ of its maker” (7).

Incorporating critical explorations of film, video, and digital media, this exemplary volume demonstrates the abundant potential of scholarship that refuses but does not ignore categorical distinctions between these forms. The book takes seriously the task of extending the critical gaze not only across different media, but also geographical and economic contexts, incorporating authors and artists working outside the Western, Anglophone world. The book is broken into three parts named for the feminist methodologies they employ: *Acknowledgements*; *Negotiations and Engagements*; and *Situations and Receptions*. Within these three sections rest one poem by Lis Rhodes, thirteen chapters, and three conversations with artist/practitioners. The book encompasses topics ranging from a feminist re-examination of the work of the elusive Italian experimental installation and multimedia artist Maria Pinelli, who withdrew from public life after the untimely death of her husband; to the field of diasporic and immigrant art and its intersection with government spending in the work of London’s Sankofa collective in the 1980s; to the work of Palestinian born L.A. based artist Basma Alsharif, who describes herself as being at home nowhere and everywhere and how this impacts her art; to the cannibalistic logic of capitalism and its masterful instrumentalization of female solidarity represented in the work of British video artists Lucy Beech and Rehana Zaman, to name but a few of the myriad directions this book takes us.

The first part, “Acknowledgements,” operates on a principle of recuperation, highlighting both neglected dimensions of well-known figures and bringing critical attention to those that have been undervalued. Standouts from this section include Elinor Cleghorn’s chapter “In a tiny realm of her own: Lotte Reiniger’s light work,” that advocates for a reconsideration of the work and legacy of the inventor of

silhouette animation, the prolific, technical genius hailing from Weimar Germany, Lotte Reiniger. Cleghorn decries that Reiniger's vast body of work, spanning from 1919 to 1980, while frequently extolled within a narrative of feminine craft practices, has been consistently ignored in the "patriarchal folds" of the annals of experimental and avant-garde cinema history (51). The volume's second chapter "Returning to *Riddles*" by Catherine Grant (re)turns our gaze to the quintessential theory-film by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *The Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) and its BFI-produced video counterpart, Emma Hedditch's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (2007). Grant argues the film "invites the viewer to take part in a questioning that continues in the present" (57), and promotes "learning through close reading, listening, and discussing ... that is key to feminist theorizing and practice across the decades" (69). The most compelling, though regrettably underdeveloped, section of Grant's essay, however, is where the author attends to the role of the *Riddles*' only Black character, Maxine. As Grant writes, repeating some of the enduring clichés of Black womanhood and the apparently inherent "strength" of this subject position: "Maxine's identity as a black woman is not explicitly discussed in the film, but her strength and emblematic presence draw links with the figure of the Sphinx as an "othered" feminine identity" (66). Thus, although Grant correctly recognizes Maxine's role in the film is precisely to be the Other, the foil for "Louise's position as a white bourgeois mother" (66), her discussion of the character remains content to replicate this instrumentalization, rather than further interrogate it. Grant notes that the question of Maxine's race "warrants further analysis" (66). Indeed. And yet, why not here? Meanwhile, So Mayer's excellent chapter, the third in this volume, "Being a together woman is a bitch': An 'African American woman's film' genealogy of Julie Dash's *Four Women* (1975)," takes as its object Julie Dash's rarely seen experimental choreo-cinematic short *Four Women*. Mayer writes of how the film offers an "intersectional feminist genealogy" (74) years before Kimberlé Crenshaw would formulate the groundbreaking methodology. This is due not only to the film's depiction of four Black women across varied generations and stations in life based on its musical source-text of Nina Simone's 1966 song of the same name, but also its spotlight on Black

dancer and choreographer, Linda Martina Young. The essay recuperates the willfully effaced story of one of the American avant-garde's most neglected innovators: dancer and choreographer Talley Beatty. Through an intimate and poignant close-reading of the texts coupled with diligent research into the film's production history, Mayer's chapter reveals the forgotten history of Beatty's central influence on Maya Deren, specifically on Deren's ground-breaking *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (1945). Mayer argues that Dash's film functions as a gesture of advocacy and transformative historiography, which rhymes with the results of her own essay, as each "challeng[e] the persistent whiteness of American feminisms and their historicization" and "transform the history of experimental cinema, giving it a new body: black, female, multiple, and dancing ubuntu with the presence of an ancestor" (83).

The book's second part, "Negotiations and Engagements," meditates on how to navigate the subtleties of patriarchal oppression in distinct places and practices. For example, Maud Jacquin's moving chapter "The Politics of Corporeal Vulnerability in Sandra Lahire's Experimental Cinema" ruminates on the entwinement of embodiment and technology, personal and documentary, and narrative and non-narrative forms in the experimental filmmaker's oeuvre. Jacquin describes how Lahire's corporeal cinema urgently expressed "the many ways in which the female body is exposed, trapped, and infiltrated by the colonizing forces of our technological and patriarchal culture," (128), generating a shared plane of vulnerability upon which a feminist ethics could be anchored. The films discussed in this chapter resist by way of re-staging with unsettling lucidity violations endured by women under techno-patriarchy. One film shows Lahire's body in the throes of anorexia, a cultural disease by which she was held captive her entire life; another depicts the fragmentation of the women's flesh via scientific, medical, and consumer discourses; another proffers an account of the dangers facing female workers in the nuclear energy field. In a different context, May Adadol Ingawanij's chapter, "Aesthetics of potentiality: Nguyen Trinh Thi's Essay Films" focuses on one of Vietnam's leading artists and founder of the Hanoi Doclab Nguyen Trinh Thi. As Ingawanij elucidates, Thi's art is primarily concerned with the potential of

collective life, and as such incorporates elements of activism, pedagogy, and collaborative modes of grass-roots production. Thi's work takes place in a contemporary Vietnamese art context caught between capitalist marketization and the influence of the socialist state, wherein modes of collectivism are oft regarded with suspicion. Both the Hanoi Doclab and Thi's own work are distinguished by their focus on the quotidian lives and the historical experience of ordinary citizens in contrast to official narratives and representational strategies. This chapter reveals that Thi's essay films occasion a unique feminist consciousness in their provocative reappropriation of state-sponsored cinema; they unfasten, refigure, and unleash these documents' latent potential to be understood otherwise, to mean differently, and to rearticulate a collective relation to the past. Alternately, Neely and Smith's chapter, "The art of maximal ventriloquy: Femininity as labour in the films of Rachel Maclean" positions Maclean squarely in line with a history of feminist video provocateurs such as Martha Rosler and Sadie Benning, and artists such as Cindy Sherman. Elaborating the extremity of Maclean's labor endured at the level of performance and creation, the authors make plain the searing relevance of her work as it replicates the terms of women's value-production in today's image-obsessed society. This chapter describes how Maclean's ornate work lampoons celebrity culture and our widespread social fetishization of youth and beauty. Her muse are the extravagant and outlandish demands on women to perform aesthetic labor in social and media worlds that revolve around hyper-visibility and self-representation. The authors adopt the term "maximal ventriloquism" (175) to name Maclean's formal style, which relies on exaggerations whose absurd proportions help demystify and critique the "saccharine surfaces" (165) of the popular culture she satirizes in a dizzying, dazzling, and often grotesque burlesque.

The anthology's third part, "Situations and Receptions," emphasizes "not who speaks, but who is spoken to, and spoken for" (13), as Reynolds outlines in the preface. For example, Catherine Elwes' chapter, "Strategies of exposure and concealment in moving image art by women; a cross-generational account," traces approaches that women artists over the decades have applied to the issue of self-

presentation in their work. The author reminds us that the problem of self-presentation in women's art "has not so much endured as mutated into a renewed anxiety" (197) in the face of our contemporary display-centric lives. A thread used to unite these tactics in the chapter is Sally Potter's famous decree that women artists must "build a new presence" to contend with the perilous overdetermination of the female form. Elwes' fascinating account details women artists whose approaches rest between the two poles disclosed in the chapter's title: the total exposure of the naked artist, and the complete eradication of her corporeal presence and re-inscription through non-visual means. Taking another direction, Maeve Connolly's chapter, "Choreographing women's work: Multitaskers, smartphone users and virtuoso performers" considers Paolo Virno's concept of the "virtuoso performer" in tangent with works by Irish artist Sarah Browne and Dutch artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh. These works interrogate and represent the dimensions of women's affective and immaterial labor as they have evolved in the post-Fordist era. Each artist's film explores the 'choreography' that typifies the multi-modal labor of women both in the workplace and the domestic sphere in distinct contexts: the Shetland Islands and Brazil. Taken together these artworks picture forms of work from social media, to knitting, to sex work, to performance, to politics in a diachronic and geographic cartography of women's reproductive labor. Finally, concluding the volume is Melissa Gronlund's provocative chapter, "Can We Still Talk about Women Artists?." Gronlund tackles head-on the anxiety evoked by the practices of feminist media analysis today. In walking the reader through the history of feminist interpretations of works by women, and these methodologies' discontents, Gronlund offers a reparative conclusion. She writes that perhaps "the fault is not in 'woman' but in what we currently mean by 'woman'—a restrictive biological or relational construct, rather than a term that could be as open and multiplici[t]ous as the artworks themselves" (256). I would suggest a slight reformulation, as the fault is not with what we currently mean by 'woman,' but, as it always already has been, with what 'woman' currently means.

The cumulative effect of Lucy Reynolds' anthology *Women Artists, Feminism, and the Moving Image: Contexts and Practices* is to assure the reader

that the feminist political struggle and feminist methodologies have far from exhausted their necessity or ability to illuminate. The volume's strengths and pleasures lie precisely in its refusal of didacticism and conformity, and its ability to navigate and detail both new and old concerns and pressures that face the field of feminist analysis today.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 5, 1986, pp. 1053–1075. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/1864376](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1864376). Accessed 2 Apr. 2021.

### Works Cited

Scott, Joan W. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 5, 1986, pp. 1053-75. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/1864376](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1864376). Accessed 2 Apr. 2021.