

**Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen:  
Theory and Practice, Aesthetics and Politics,  
1963-1983**

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## **Declaration of Authorship**

I, Nicolas Helm-Grovas, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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## **Abstract**

This PhD is a genealogy and critical examination of the writings and films of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, spanning the period from the early 1960s to 1980s. Despite the prominence of their texts, there has not been a book-length study of either body of writing, nor an overview of their overlap and mutual influence, in what was their most productive period. Nor has there been an extended account of the important connection between their theory and their practice as filmmakers. My thesis undertakes these tasks. I interpret and challenge existing scholarship, while simultaneously examining in detail for the first time lesser-known works, drawing on archives and interviews. Through close readings I elucidate Mulvey's interrogation of the patriarchal fantasies structuring cinematic and artistic forms and her feminist appropriation of classical Hollywood melodrama; I map the related issues Wollen's texts activate, of cinematic signification and materialism, the buried potentialities of the historical avant-gardes, and their connection to the avant-garde film contemporaneous with his writings. Their moving image works, I demonstrate through detailed analyses, bring these ideas into dialogue and work them through in a more open, exploratory vein. I trace key notions like 'counter cinema' across films and writings by both authors. Shifting between writings and films allows me to investigate authorship and collaboration, while their designation of their films as 'theory films' opens the question of the interconnection of theoretical and aesthetic discourse. I track their output through the era's pivotal intellectual movements (semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalysis and Marxism) and political currents (the New Left, May '68 and its aftereffects, the women's movement). In doing so I also provide a picture of the radical, experimental film culture that thrived in Britain

from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, and the broader left-wing counter-culture of which it was a part.

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helped me think through various ideas. Broader thoughts were shaped by the panel ‘Writing / Theory / Independence, 1970-1985’, which Mandy Merck, Mark Nash and Kathryn Siegel agreed to participate in and which I arranged and chaired as part of ‘Reactivating the 1970s: Radical Film and Video Culture in Theory and Practice’, a day of panels and screenings at Open School East in 2016 that I co-organised with Clarissa Jacob and Ed Webb-Ingall, with funding from Royal Holloway. Ed Webb-Ingall also ran a series of seminars alongside the 2015 BFI season ‘Cinema Born Again: Radical Film from the 70s’, where I benefitted from discussion with Alex Ressel, Herb Shellenberger and Wilf Speller, among others.

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# Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1. Origins of a Collaboration</b>	<b>36</b>
The Writings of ‘Lee Russell’	36
<i>Signs and Meaning in the Cinema</i> and the Late 1960s	47
Mulvey Before ‘Visual Pleasure’	77
<b>2. Semiotics/Ideology/Counter-cinema</b>	<b>94</b>
‘Art in Revolution’	94
‘The Text is the Factory Where Thought is at Work’: Semiotics and Modernism	100
‘Godard and Counter Cinema’	115
‘Scorched Earth’, or Film as Ideology Critique: <i>Penthesilea</i> , <i>Queen of the Amazons</i>	132
<b>3. Passionate Detachment</b>	<b>157</b>
‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’	157
Mulvey, Sirk and Melodrama	178
‘The Two Avant-Gardes’	193
<b>4. Film in the House of the Word</b>	<b>213</b>
<i>Riddles of the Sphinx</i>	213
‘Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde’	236
‘And the words? Look’: Signification, Ontology, Material	252
<b>5. ‘They Had Damaged the Map to Dreamland’</b>	<b>273</b>
Identification and Interpellation: <i>AMY!</i>	273

Reconsidering Visual Pleasure	288
<i>Crystal Gazing</i>	302
Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti	317
<i>The Bad Sister</i>	326
<b>Conclusion – On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief</b>	<b>337</b>
<b>Moment in Time</b>	
<b>Appendix – Figures</b>	<b>342</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>365</b>



## Introduction

Godard's not a dialectician. What counts with him isn't two or three or however many, it's AND, the conjunction AND. The key thing is Godard's use of AND.  
- Gilles Deleuze<sup>1</sup>

In 1981, picking up a term used previously by Noel Carroll,<sup>2</sup> the US journal *October* published a special issue on 'The New Talkies'. In the introduction, the editors state that the collected texts 'proceed from the radical critique of representation, through methods of textual analysis and deconstruction at work within the disciplines of psychoanalysis and semiotics, towards the analysis of the impact of the recent resurgence of text within film practice, specifically in its claim for a critical, discursive function within cinema itself'. Such a trend, they suggest, developed in the previous decade, though it has its roots in the 1960s. The editors define the issue's focus in terms of five areas:

1. The convergence of European and American film practice upon the critical, discursive function.
2. The manner in which film practice thereby claims a theoretical function.
3. The social and political determinants of such developments and the question of the spectator/audience.
4. The relation of formal innovation to the discursive project.
5. The emergence of feminist film theory and practice and their consequences for the discursive project.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of this introduction is such that D. N. Rodowick also cites it at the beginning of *The Crisis of Political Modernism*, his study of post-1968 critical film

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'Three Questions on *Six Times Two*', *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 44

<sup>2</sup> Noel Carroll and Yvonne Rainer, 'Interview with a Woman Who...', *Millennium Film Journal* 7-9 (Fall, 1980/81), p. 37

<sup>3</sup> Editors, 'The New Talkies: A Special Issue', *October* 17 (Summer, 1981), p. 3

theory, in which the work of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen is prominent.<sup>4</sup> The themes delineated in the above passage – the ‘radical critique of representation’; the fundamental position granted to the methods of semiotics and psychoanalysis; the concept of ‘text’ as characteristic of a mode of *cinematic production*; the convergence of European and North American avant-garde streams; the claim that film *practice* may arrogate a theoretical function; the importance accorded to the spectator in these discussions; the idea that ‘formal innovation’ must in some way be connected to the discursive, critical or theoretical function that this cinema takes up; the relation of the foregoing to social and political matters; the centrality of feminist filmmaking and theory for this project – make clear that the theories and strategies Mulvey and Wollen had previously developed and which had reached a kind of maturity by the mid- to late 1970s had by the beginning of the 1980s become highly influential for a certain avant-garde film practice and its surrounding discourse.

One of the starting points for this thesis is the assumption that Mulvey and Wollen are a privileged optic for viewing a larger social, political, cultural and artistic trajectory. Their work intersects with and exemplifies the key intellectual movements (semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism) and political currents (the New Left, the women’s movement and the aftereffects of May ’68) of their era. Mulvey and Wollen’s films can be framed in a cinematic history taking in structural film in North America and Europe, and the European radical cinema of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, Chantal Akerman and Jean-Luc Godard. As theorists and filmmakers, the two participated in almost all the key debates, moments and institutions of the radical, experimental film culture that thrived in

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<sup>4</sup> D. N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*, second edition (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 3-7

Britain from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. They made crucial contributions to the pivotal publications of this milieu, such as *Screen* (whose editorial board Wollen was on from the early to late 1970s),<sup>5</sup> *Afterimage* and *Framework* (whose editorial board both were on from the early 1980s, a shift in centre of gravity away from *Screen*).<sup>6</sup> Their films trace an arc from self-funding with a small budget for *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons* in 1974, to state funding for *Riddles of the Sphinx* (from the British Film Institute Production Board, 1977), *AMY!* (from Southern Arts, one of the regional arts associations, 1980) and *Frida and Tina* (from the Arts Council, 1983),<sup>7</sup> to joint state and commercial funding for *Crystal Gazing* (from the BFI and Channel Four, 1982), to commercial funding for 1983's *The Bad Sister* (Channel Four), taking in all the main finance sources for experimental film in Britain in this period. Both played significant roles in the Independent Film-Makers' Association (IFA) and various events and publications of the Edinburgh Film Festival in its radical period of the 1970s; Mulvey was on the board of management of the short-lived independent cinema *The Other Cinema* (1975-1978) and a member of the Arts Council Artists' Film Sub-Committee (1976-1979); Wollen was an employee of the BFI Education Department in its 'laboratory' phase of the late 1960s, a member of the 1970 Action Committee that sought to dismiss the BFI's governors and drastically reconfigure the central institution for film in Britain, and

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<sup>5</sup> Wollen was on the editorial board from 12:1 (Spring, 1971) to 17:4 (Winter, 1976). From 1972 to 1974, when he was teaching at Northwestern University in the USA, Wollen was listed as a foreign editor

<sup>6</sup> Mulvey and Wollen joined the editorial board with *Framework* 13 (Autumn, 1980)

<sup>7</sup> For the Arts Council and regional arts associations, see Christophe Dupin, 'The British Film Institute as a sponsor and producer of non-commercial film: a contextualised analysis of the origins, policy, administration, policy and achievements of the BFI Experimental Film Fund (1952-1965) and Production Board (1966-1979)', PhD thesis, Birkbeck, University of London, 2005, pp. 181-183

debated with Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice at the London Film-Makers' Co-op in the 1970s.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, context is intimately related to the form of Mulvey and Wollen's work: their preference for producing essays rather than books, as well as the note-like style that Wollen sometimes employs, is generated by the desire to intervene in a rapidly changing conjuncture. This context is not an academic one. As Wollen argues in an interview with Wanda Bershen in 1985, the fact that film had not yet entered academia at this point facilitated an intellectual, polemical milieu that recalled the Soviet Union of the 1920s, which he had described in his 1969 book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*.<sup>9</sup> In the earlier text he spoke of how, '[w]ith the breakdown of the old academic system, there was not a slackening of intellectual pace, but actually an intensification. There was the crystallisation of an authentic intelligentsia, rather than an academic hierarchy: like all intelligentsias, it was built round a revival of serious journalism and polemic' (*SM*, 3).<sup>10</sup> What Wollen is expounding here is an idea articulated more recently by Colin Perry, that British independent cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s, and the broader left-wing culture of which it was a part, formed a counter public sphere.<sup>11</sup> As Perry argues, a film such as *Riddles of the Sphinx* (like Berwick Street Collective's 1975 *Nightcleaners* or Sue Clayton and Jonathan Curling's 1979 *Song of the Shirt*) engaged various

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<sup>8</sup> For the BFI Action Committee, see Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'The 1970 Crisis at the BFI and its Aftermath', *Screen* 47:4 (Winter, 2006), pp. 453-459. See also Wollen's letter in *Time Out* 53 (12 December, 1970), p. 19. For the debate with Gidal and Le Grice, see documentation in Mark Webber (ed.), *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative 1966-1976* (London: LUX, 2016), pp. 231-241

<sup>9</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Scenes of the Crime' (interview with Wanda Bershen), *Afterimage* 12:7 (February, 1985), p. 14 (this is the US publication *Afterimage*, not the UK-based *Afterimage* cited elsewhere in this thesis)

<sup>10</sup> Throughout this PhD, references for Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, fifth edition (London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), are given in the text under *SM*

<sup>11</sup> Colin Perry, 'Into the Mainstream: Independent Film and Video Counterpublics and Television in Britain, 1974-1990', PhD thesis, University of the Arts London, 2016, p. 15

‘counterpublics’,<sup>12</sup> as it was exhibited and received in the context of film theory, experimental film, women’s movement activism, psychoanalysis, and so on. While my primary focus is on Mulvey and Wollen’s output, I track the above through their writings and films, narrating this history as a backdrop, beginning with Wollen’s early pseudonymous writings in *New Left Review* in the early 1960s and Mulvey’s in women’s movement publications in the early 1970s, and concluding with the end of their filmmaking partnership and separation in the early to mid-1980s.

Perhaps more importantly, Mulvey and Wollen’s films and writings enable one to address a number of theoretical topics. One of these is the matter of individual and collaborative authorship. Mulvey and Wollen’s joint filmmaking, as Volker Pantenburg remarks, is part of a larger history of (heterosexual) filmmaking couples that includes Huillet and Straub, Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, and Peter and Zsóka Nestler. These exemplify a minimal unit of collectivity: the film collective is reduced to its bare essentials, harnessing some of its principles and energy while circumventing some of the difficulties of larger scale group-work. Moreover, by combining romantic and artistic partnership, the distinctions between the personal and the political and between art and life are broken down.<sup>13</sup> Yet the reverse of what Pantenburg calls the ‘domestic utopia of the working couple’ is surely the problem that this collaboration takes place across patriarchy; there is a certain irony in basing a radical artistic practice in the institution of marriage, an institution historically of gender oppression, not equality. Several questions therefore arise. Why collaborate as a couple? How was work concretely undertaken as a partnership? And how might these matters manifest themselves in their films?

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<sup>12</sup> Perry, ‘Into the Mainstream’, p. 64

<sup>13</sup> Volker Pantenburg, ‘The Third Avant-Garde: Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen, and the Theory-Film’, lecture given at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 14 May 2016

The answer to the first of these, I suggest, is partly contextual, especially when one considers that in addition to the European working couples Pantenburg mentions, there is a trend of male-female collaborations in British independent cinema of the late 1970s and early 1980s, exemplified also by Clayton and Curling's *Song of the Shirt* or Anthea Kennedy and Nicolas Burton's *At the Fountainhead* (1980). I would argue that the centrality of feminism within Anglophone film theory in this period, which had a significant influence on British independent filmmaking, made the option of women directing with men on an ostensible equal footing more likely than before, as feminist topics were now seen as crucial to broader issues of cinema. Moreover, I suggest that the preponderance of socialist-feminism in the UK women's movement made collaboration with men more admissible as a strategy for feminists than it might be, say, in the USA, where radical feminism, with its greater emphasis on separatism, was more significant. Indeed, a collaboration between a man and a woman might be particularly amenable to posing questions of gender politics alongside those of labour politics, as Mulvey and Wollen's films frequently do. In answer to the second question, throughout this thesis I assume – based on my interviews with Mulvey – that the division of filmmaking labour was more or less equal (with perhaps the exception of Wollen taking the lead at the writing stage of the films, but with Mulvey's interests having a greater influence over subject matter) and characterised by extensive discussion of all aspects of each film, rather than specialisation in terms of particular roles.<sup>14</sup> This is supported by looking at contemporaneous joint interviews with Mulvey and Wollen, where neither dominates conversation. Both shaped the reception of their work, travelling with it and presenting it together or separately. In answer to the third question, I propose the

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 22 July 2017

notion of a ‘disjunctive collaboration’. My thinking here can be elucidated with reference to what Linda R. Williams has written on a slightly different topic, the place of men in relation to feminism. Williams speaks of ‘[c]reative hostility’ as a more productive strategy for feminists than ‘pseudo-solidarity across gender lines’, and urges that ‘[i]n order to think and work one must be able to *use* the boundaries of opposition’, such as between men and women, ‘without being determined or essentialised by those boundaries’.<sup>15</sup> In similar vein, I suggest that a partnership between two people with many similarities in terms of background, politics and artistic tastes, but positioned quite differently as gendered subjects, especially when one of these is explicitly a feminist, leads to a cinema in which (without having an essentialist understanding of these) two distinct, identifiable sets of concerns intersect. These may mesh together concordantly or layer over one another to produce unexpected relations and connections, but they may also pull apart and work against each other to produce gaps and ruptures which themselves are productive. At one end of the spectrum certain devices and themes are overdetermined (like the pans in *Riddles of the Sphinx*, which condense multiple citations, meanings and effects), at the other end there is contradiction between cinematic elements (as when the feminist demand for women to speak in their own words in *Penthesilea*, *Queen of the Amazons* is troubled by the film’s scepticism concerning the possibility of authentic self-expression).

Although the justification for considering Mulvey and Wollen together derives primarily from their films, which form a bridge between their two sets of writings, it is reinforced by the mutual influence visible between their texts. Certain concepts, such as ‘counter-cinema’, or key reference points, such as Mary Kelly, are

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<sup>15</sup> Linda R. Williams, ‘Men in Feminism’, *Women: A Cultural Review* 1:1 (April, 1990), p. 64

traceable across their films and both bodies of writing. This should undercut an individualist conception of artistic and theoretical production, as we see propositions travel between corpuses with different names attached to them. In a sense, I want to extend the notion of collaboration beyond works that are explicitly co-authored, to a broader intellectual dialogue going on in the background but becoming visible at key moments. For similar reasons, I have emphasised the parallels with, and influences of and on, other writers, such as Claire Johnston, Christian Metz, Annette Michelson and the editorial collective of *Camera Obscura*, as well as those beyond the frame of cinema such as Griselda Pollock, Mary Kelly and Victor Burgin. I also place a strong accent on the play of citation and allusion in Mulvey and Wollen's films, as this intertextuality is an attempt to evade the classical author as 'punctual source' of a film's meaning.<sup>16</sup> This said, my thesis draws awareness to the particularity of their work individually, most notably Mulvey's centring of gender in her analyses and her concentration on the spectator, as against Wollen's structuralist- and Russian Formalist-influenced focus on the text.

As the discussion of 'The New Talkies' implies, Mulvey and Wollen's work is also ideal terrain for exploring questions of language, signification and textuality in relation to cinema. This is due, on the one hand, to the specific theoretical positions they advance and the cinematic strategies they experiment with, but also, on the other hand, to their dual roles as filmmakers and critics/theorists. Although filmmakers from Sergei Eisenstein to Stan Brakhage have written about film, while conversely many critics have become involved in film or television production (for instance the directors of the French New Wave), in Mulvey and Wollen's case we see a project of conscious work on both fronts. Although they are still primarily

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Heath, 'Comment on "The Idea of Authorship"', *Screen* 14:3 (Autumn, 1973), p. 88



received as theorists, not entirely surprisingly given that both have concentrated primarily on writing since the mid-1980s, I would suggest that they can also be apprehended as part of a contemporaneous pattern of ‘theorists-filmmakers’, along with Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni, Thierry Kuntzel and Noël Burch in France, and Alexander Kluge and Harun Farocki in Germany. As filmmakers as well as writers, Mulvey and Wollen obviate the anti-cinematic positions implicit in much film theory of the late 1960s and 1970s: in French ‘apparatus theory’, as Pantenburg observes,<sup>17</sup> and in *Screen* writers such as Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath, whose critique similarly sometimes seems to militate against almost any positive use of cinema.<sup>18</sup>

It is therefore perhaps surprising that Mulvey and Wollen have not been the subject of a monograph.<sup>19</sup> Some of their texts, of course, have received levels of attention and attained influence that few others in the history of moving image scholarship have achieved. Most notable, obviously, is Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, frequently described as the most cited essay in film studies, influential across numerous disciplines and widely taught on undergraduate arts and humanities courses. Yet other writings by Mulvey and Wollen have drawn little or no examination, while their films have in general been accorded far less study. The relationship between films and writings, and the overlap and mutual influence

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<sup>17</sup> Volker Pantenburg, *Farocki/Godard: Film as Theory*, trans. Michael Turnbull (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), pp. 42-43. I discuss apparatus theory in chapters two and three

<sup>18</sup> At times it seems that for MacCabe only Godard is a permissible filmmaker; Heath’s canon of the mid- to late 1970s is somewhat wider, including Nagisa Oshima, Peter Gidal and Akerman. See Colin MacCabe, ‘Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses’, *Screen* 15:2 (Summer, 1974), pp. 24-25, and ‘The Politics of Separation’, *Screen* 16:4 (Winter, 1975), for instance the criticisms of Straub on p. 51. For Heath, see ‘Narrative Space’, *Screen* 17:3 (Autumn, 1976), pp. 42-45; ‘*Anata mo*’, *Screen* 17:4 (Winter, 1976), pp. 49-66; ‘Difference’, *Screen* 19:3 (Autumn, 1978), pp. 95-101; ‘Afterword’ [to Peter Gidal’s ‘The Anti-Narrative’], *Screen* 20:2 (Summer, 1979), pp. 93-99

<sup>19</sup> Although recently Mulvey’s work has been the subject of a special journal issue: *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 15:4 (2017)

between the two authors, has been under-explored.<sup>20</sup> My thesis undertakes these tasks. It negotiates the disparity in engagements with their work by interpreting and challenging existing scholarship where relevant, while simultaneously examining in detail for the first time lesser-known works, drawing on archives and interviews. As well as the interest in itself of presenting and analysing comparatively little-discussed material, these deepen, refine and reorientate understanding of the more prominent works.

In the last five years, there has been an increased interest in Mulvey and Wollen's films.<sup>21</sup> This is part of a wider resurgence of interest in 1970s radical film in Britain, which has included publications, screenings and exhibitions.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in her introduction to the retrospective 'Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Beyond the Scorched Earth of Counter-Cinema' at Whitechapel Gallery in London in 2016,

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<sup>20</sup> I catalogue much of the pre-existing literature on their films and writings in the relevant sections of my thesis. A notable exception to the tendency to privilege Mulvey and Wollen's writing over their filmmaking that bears mention here is the resource of LUXONLINE, which provides a Mulvey and Wollen biography, bibliography, film clips, a list of screenings and exhibitions, several archived essays by Mulvey and Wollen, and a featured essay on their work by Rakhee Balaram. [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/laura\\_mulvey\\_and\\_peter\\_wollen/index.html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/laura_mulvey_and_peter_wollen/index.html) (last accessed June 8, 2018)

<sup>21</sup> In London, there have been screenings of *AMY!* (Birkbeck, University of London, 2013), *Riddles of the Sphinx* (BFI, 2014; Goldsmiths, University of London, 2016) and *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons* (BFI, 2015), as well as 'Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Beyond the Scorched Earth of Counter-Cinema', a retrospective of all their joint films and much of their solo work accompanied by an extensive program of discussions at Whitechapel Gallery (12-22 May 2016), which later travelled in modified form to New York University (11-14 November 2016), organised by Oliver Fuke. In addition, in 2013 the German distributor Arsenal released a DVD of *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *AMY!*, while the BFI released a DVD/blu-ray of *Riddles of the Sphinx* which includes *Penthesilea* as an extra

<sup>22</sup> For instance, the aforementioned Webber (ed.), *Shoot Shoot Shoot*; Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner (eds.), *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s* (Southend-on-Sea: Focal Point Gallery, 2013); Patti Gaal-Holmes, *A History of 1970s Experimental Film: Britain's Decade of Diversity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Holly Aylett (ed.), *Marc Karlin: Look Again* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); Peter Gidal, *Flare Out: Aesthetics 1966-2016*, ed. Peter Gidal and Mark Webber (London: The Visible Press, 2016); Sue Clayton and Laura Mulvey (eds.), *Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and Experimental Film in the 1970s* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).

The latter was accompanied by screenings and discussions at Close-Up and Whitechapel Gallery on 16 and 17 September 2017. Other recent screenings include *Song of the Shirt* (Genesis Cinema, 2013) and *Nightcleaners* (BFI, 2015). 'Regroupings', held at the Edinburgh Film Festival on 23-25 June 2016, centred screenings and discussions on the 'International Forum on Avant-Garde Film' held at the festival 40 years earlier (for the 1976 event, see chapter three). The exhibition 'The Inoperative Community', at Raven Row, London, 3 December 2015-14 February 2016, curated by Dan Kidner, included an extensive selection of 1970s experimental and radical film

Mulvey remarked on the parallel between the current interest in the 1970s and the earlier retrospective gaze of her own generation to the radical critical and artistic production of the 1920s and 1930s. My thesis, then, is part of an ongoing collective archaeology of this period: a process of re-reading and re-evaluation against reductive received narratives, for instance the monolithic concept of ‘*Screen theory*’ which sometimes circulates as a founding myth of film studies.<sup>23</sup>

However, the longest shadow cast over this PhD is by a work first published in the late 1980s: Rodowick’s aforementioned *The Crisis of Political Modernism*. Rodowick’s depth, philosophical rigour and relentlessness in searching for aporias and lacunae in the writings he interrogates sets the standard in discussions of British and French film theory of 1968 to the early 1980s. It is a key guiding text that I refer to frequently. However, apart from the fact that the object of *The Crisis of Political Modernism* is different from mine (it sets itself the aim of delineating and critiquing the discourse of political modernism in film theory, a task that involves examining other critics and theorists as well as detailed analysis of key texts by Wollen – to whom he devotes two chapters – and, to a lesser extent, Mulvey),<sup>24</sup> and aside from local divergences in our interpretations of particular passages in Mulvey and Wollen’s writings, I would like to indicate three important differences between Rodowick’s book and my PhD. First, *The Crisis of Political Modernism* is principally an internal, textual analysis. Although my method is also one of close

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<sup>23</sup> For an excellent account of *Screen*’s central place in the film theory of this era, delineating its overarching assumptions and arguments while sensitive to internal heterogeneity, see Philip Rosen, ‘*Screen* and 1970s Film Theory’, in Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (eds.), *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 264-297. For the perspective of a former *Screen* editor, see Mark Nash, ‘The Moment of *Screen*’, *Screen Theory Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 1-27. For a critique of reductive versions of this history as early as 1996, see Catherine Lupton, ‘Discourses of Avant-Gardism in British Film Culture 1966-1979’, PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 1996, pp. 103-114

<sup>24</sup> Rodowick focuses more on Mulvey in his next book, *The Difficulty of Difference: Psychoanalysis, Sexual Difference and Film Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991)

readings of films and writings, I set these against the wider social, political, cultural and artistic background described above. Second, Rodowick's book does not give a strong sense of development, even tending to read texts by the same author from different times as adding up to a coherent statement (as I note in chapter three in relation to Rodowick's interpretation of 'The Two Avant-Gardes' and 'Godard and Counter Cinema', for example).<sup>25</sup> In contrast, I aim to show the unfolding of ideas, the way Mulvey and Wollen's positions develop out of the assumptions, objectives and shortcomings of previous ones – hence my chronological framework.

Third, and most importantly, Rodowick always abstracts to the same order of discourse: the philosophical or theoretical. He treats all his objects of analysis as works of film theory, even if this is not their exclusive, or even primary, characteristic, as he himself acknowledges.<sup>26</sup> This is most obvious in Rodowick's longest engagement with any film in *The Crisis of Political Modernism, Riddles of the Sphinx*. Longest is a relative term here. For in marked contrast to Rodowick's ability to unspool the ideas, arguments and contradictions of a single essay over pages and pages, his reading of *Riddles of the Sphinx* covers less than four. More significantly, the discussion here is characterised by *extracting* from the film a theoretical position which is then evaluated *as theory*. Although Mulvey and Wollen's films are certainly, indeed, explicitly, 'theoretical films' – the nature of what constitutes a theoretical film being a central question of my thesis, as I outline below – one must, unlike Rodowick, be attentive to how such a theoretical discourse is produced via cinematic means. My approach, then, is to intercut between films and writings, being sensitive to the different modalities and registers of each, as well

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<sup>25</sup> Rodowick does, however, indicate how the positions associated with 1970s Anglophone film theory had their roots in debates in French criticism in the period immediately following May '68. *Crisis*, pp. 62 and 67-110

<sup>26</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. x

as to disparate kinds of written text. Despite his illuminating interpretations of Mulvey and Wollen's writings, my own approach is more adequate to the heterogeneity, in subject matter and form, of Mulvey and Wollen's work. Such a procedure, in fact, has previously been utilised by Rakhee Balaram and Winfried Pauleit, in short essays that interweave discussion of their writings and theories. However, these are brief texts focussing primarily on Mulvey and Wollen's first three films and their writings of the mid-1970s. My thesis expands this remit both by enlarging the frame to cover a twenty year period of their work and by working at a greater level of detail.<sup>27</sup>

My method in this thesis is one of close analysis of writings and films, at the same time dredging the intellectual, artistic and political contexts that lie behind and shape them, making use of archives and my own interviews with Mulvey.<sup>28</sup> The thesis is, in part, an intellectual history, in that it tracks the shifting problematics of two bodies of writing in a broadly chronological fashion, tracing the interrelations and influences between Mulvey and Wollen's positions, identifying the sources of many of their ideas (for instance in French film theory of the late 1960s and 1970s, in Bertolt's Brecht's critical writings, and in the output of the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s), and framing this against a social, cultural and political background, as well as – to a lesser degree – biographical discussion. However, as already stated, my intention is to be attentive to Mulvey and Wollen as artists as well as thinkers: even if they make films as intellectuals rather than artisans, as I claim in chapter

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<sup>27</sup> Rakhee Balaram, 'Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen', online at [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/laura\\_mulvey\\_and\\_peter\\_wollen/essay\(1\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/laura_mulvey_and_peter_wollen/essay(1).html) (last accessed June 8, 2018); Winfried Pauleit, "Riddles of the Sphinx". *The Work of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Between Counter-Strategy and Deconstruction*, online at [http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/art\\_and\\_cinematography/mulvey\\_mollen/](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/art_and_cinematography/mulvey_mollen/) (last accessed December 13, 2017), reprinted in booklet of Arsenal DVD of *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *AMY!*

<sup>28</sup> Peter Wollen has been ill with Alzheimer's since the early 2000s and unavailable for interview

four, their ideas always have to be instantiated cinematically in their films. I return here to a point I made with respect to Rodowick's *Crisis of Political Modernism*: I do not wish to privilege an abstractly understood domain of ideas, but to place theory and practice on a level footing, to see what interaction and mutual critique emerges. To do justice to Mulvey and Wollen's work therefore requires interweaving such an intellectual history with film and art history, hence my extensive analyses of their six jointly-directed films.

Moreover, although I arrange my thesis more or less chronologically, my desire to address the theoretical topics described at the beginning of this introduction (the exchange between theory and practice; authorship and collaboration; signification, materialism, language; connections between formal experiment and feminist and socialist politics) means that I dedicate long sections to unravelling the arguments, strategies and features of individual writings and films. I wish to pull out more general topics, the interest of which is not directly historical, but speaks to ongoing issues for a political aesthetics in cinema and beyond. It is therefore worth stating at this juncture the strong degree of presentness that Mulvey and Wollen's first three films have in the context of contemporary artists' moving image. The chapter titles, analysis of cultural artefacts, intertextual reference and mute performance elements of *Penthesilea* are echoed in Duncan Campbell's Turner Prize winning *It For Others* (2013), for instance.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the alternation of indexical traces registering where events occurred and the presentation of documents of *AMY!* is recalled by Eric Baudelaire's *Also Known as Jihadi* (2017), itself an engagement with a radical filmmaker working just before Mulvey and Wollen, Masao Adachi. Furthermore, Mulvey and Wollen's introduction of the concept of the 'theory film'

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<sup>29</sup> Some of these parallels were pointed out to me by Erika Balsom

to describe their early films evokes the ‘essay film’ notion much in currency at present in moving image production, criticism and scholarship. (However, for reasons I outline in chapter two I have preferred to elucidate the specificity of ‘theory film’, even if recently Mulvey herself has re-read *Riddles of the Sphinx* through the essay film optic.)<sup>30</sup>

The contemporaneity of Mulvey and Wollen’s work that I argue for, my sense of its relevance and significance in the present, points up the possible danger of collapsing the distance between Mulvey and Wollen’s positions and my own critical stance. This is especially so when I present their accounts of third parties: Sirk or Freud as interpreted by Mulvey, Godard or Metz as filtered through Wollen, for example. It is difficult here to always clearly maintain the distinctions between, say, Freud’s arguments and Mulvey’s reading of Freud, with my own arguments occupying a slippery place between and outside them. Adding to this predicament, Mulvey and Wollen are extremely sensitive interpreters of their own films, and very forthcoming in writings and interviews about their aims and strategies. The risk of being overly guided by Mulvey and Wollen’s perspectives on their own work is intensified by the fact that they approach filmmaking with an extremely high degree of intentionality: the reasons for employing particular cinematic devices are for the most part consciously and explicitly cognised (and therefore explicable by the filmmakers in speech or writing) and then executed, rather than intuitively discovered in the process of working. (Indeed, this is the stake of Wollen’s problematic privileging of ‘composition’ over ‘performance’, discussed in chapter one.) Still, although I write from a sympathetic position, and although I draw frequently on Mulvey and Wollen’s self-critique and self-analysis, I strive to

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<sup>30</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘*Riddles as Essay Film*’, in Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (eds.), *Essays on the Essay Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 314-322

maintain analytical space between my arguments and their own, noting where I am paraphrasing their work and marking my disagreement where necessary. This is particularly important given the hagiographic, celebratory tone of many engagements with Mulvey's work, which ironically does little justice to its complexities.

The issue I have just described has an affective as well as methodological dimension: the danger of my positions being assimilated to Mulvey and Wollen's is in part the result of a certain identification with the objects of study. This is particularly the case with Wollen, who despite having a class and educational background very different to mine, uses his writing to explore almost all the topics that interest me intellectually, and invests many of his texts with a libidinal charge and urgency that militate against a merely academic engagement as a reader.

Further, Wollen's positioning as a man attempting to collaborate in the production of feminist films bears a noticeable similarity to the way I am situated as a man writing about Laura Mulvey's work. Rather than disavowing this identification, I wish to make it explicit, for two reasons. First, as Catherine Grant has argued in her discussion of fandom in relation to second wave feminism, such an affective relation to one's objects of study has a constitutive dimension, providing the impulse and ongoing sustenance for scholarly investigation. It is especially necessary to recognise this emotional attachment – which forms a dialectic with a 'colder', critical component in research and writing – when one is dealing with materials of political relevance.<sup>31</sup> Second, the fact that this identification is stronger with Wollen than with Mulvey indicates my possibly vexed placement as a man whose thesis in part investigates a prominent feminist theorist and filmmaker. Without proposing

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<sup>31</sup> Catherine Grant, 'Fans of Feminism: Re-writing Histories of Second-wave Feminism in Contemporary Art', *Oxford Art Journal* 34:2 (2011), p. 269



any easy way of escaping this difficulty, I wish here simply to acknowledge the blind spots and doubts this position implies.

One aspect of the thesis that might justifiably read as an omission determined by such a position is its relative paucity of biographical discussion. Although I investigate a filmmaking collaboration predicated on a romantic relationship, I mostly avoid Mulvey and Wollen's personal lives. Surely, it might be queried, there is something curious about eschewing this material when writing about Mulvey, a critic and filmmaker whose formation was the women's movement, with its insistence on the political and intellectual import of the personal? While other researchers might indeed have productively brought this material into frame more than I do, I think my decision can be justified. Mulvey's own writing is itself noticeably impersonal. Mulvey's introductions to the first and second editions of her essay collection *Visual and Other Pleasures*, published in 1989 and 2009 respectively, which purport to put the essays in the book in their intellectual, political, artistic and biographical context, are striking when she briefly touches upon her own life. Her description here is sparse and delivered in the neutral language of traditional biographies of historical figures – she speaks primarily of her class, family background and education, with little of the texture of specific detail. Personal relationships go unremarked: despite discussing her artistic collaboration with Wollen, their marriage is not even mentioned, nor is the fact that she gave birth to a son, Chad, in the late 1960s, the experience of which would provide material for *Riddles of the Sphinx*. As I suggest in chapter one, it is less the centring or revaluation of the personal that seems to have been enabling about the women's movement for Mulvey, than the opportunity to identify with a collective subject: 'women'. This made speech possible, but paradoxically by speaking through a 'We'

not an 'I'. Sometimes manifested in strategies of collaboration and anonymity in Mulvey's early writings, this collective subject is a strong presence even in her singly-authored works.

Furthermore, the tone of Mulvey and Wollen's films is impersonal. The impersonal discourse of theory is interweaved into them; they constantly seek to undermine the traditional author-figure through strategies such as quotation and reference, a stance theorised in Wollen's writings. This is notwithstanding the fact that Mulvey and Wollen themselves appear in their films. (The way such appearances are consistent with an impersonal mode is discussed in relation to *Penthesilea* in chapter two). This is characteristic even of *Riddles of the Sphinx*, their film with the most obvious biographical determinants. Mulvey's own experience as a mother is evidently important to a film whose central narrative dramatises the early stages of motherhood. Yet such personal material is always held at arm's length by the film's formal strategies, its recourse to psychoanalytic explanation, and its disguising and displacing of the relation of the film's subject matter to Mulvey and Wollen's personal lives. Chad Wollen appears in the film, for instance, but walking over a bridge in the distance (with the artist Tina Keane), so far away that it is impossible to infer his presence from the film itself.<sup>32</sup> Mulvey's presence in the film's second and sixth sections is ironically emblematic of this effacement of the personal: she appears in the guise of an intellectual giving a lecture on the history of the sphinx myth, making no allusion to any possible parallel between herself and the character of Louise.

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<sup>32</sup> Chad's appearance is mentioned in the commentary to the BFI DVD/blu-ray of the film

In Deleuze's understanding of Godard's films, the structuring principle 'AND' signals a process of accretion, a conjunction allowing a continuous addition of perspectives, concepts, images, sounds.<sup>33</sup> 'AND' is crucial to Mulvey and Wollen also, but I take it instead to emblematised a constant traffic across the terms of various binaries: narrative and spectacle, composition and performance, dominant cinema and counter cinema, 'Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti', first and second avant-gardes. The prevalence of this dichotomous model is indicated by Wollen's essay titles – 'Cinema and Semiology', 'Cinema – Code and Image', "'Ontology'" and "'Materialism'" in Film', 'Photography and Aesthetics', 'Cinema and Technology'. The binaries in the title of my thesis are therefore mimetic, as I move between the two halves of a couple and between film theory and film practice. However, my thesis shows how these multiple binaries cut across each other in a way that is far from straightforward.

In particular, neither theory and practice nor theoretical and aesthetic can be unproblematically projected onto writings and films respectively, for the following reasons. First, Mulvey and Wollen's first three films are, in their own phrase, 'theory films'. As I discuss in chapter two with reference to Pantenburg, this entails not just the insertion of conceptual discourse into cinema via language (although Mulvey and Wollen make extended use of this), but also an attempt to produce such a discourse through a specifically filmic organisation of materials. In another text, describing Harun Farocki's films, Pantenburg speaks of this as the paradoxical procedure of 'generating theory through practice'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, in Mulvey and Wollen's theoretical films, even the apparently more stable distinction between films and

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<sup>33</sup> Deleuze, 'Three Questions on *Six Times Two*', p. 44

<sup>34</sup> Volker Pantenburg, "'Now That's Brecht at Last!': Harun Farocki's Observational Films", in Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (eds.), *Documentary Across Disciplines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), p. 144

writings is blurred, since not only do Mulvey and Wollen's films contain writing (not only spoken language), but an abiding metaphor they deploy for these films is the *text*, on the model of the French term *écriture*, through which films and writings are placed on the same plane, both instances of signifying production.

Second, these theoretical films find their counterpart in Wollen's fictional writings, though I have not found space in this PhD to discuss them.<sup>35</sup> These incorporate theoretical discourse, as Wollen points out, while a text like 'Mexico/Women/Art' (discussed in chapter five) blends fiction and criticism evenly.<sup>36</sup> Third, there are the manifesto-like characteristics of some of Mulvey and Wollen's writings, from which we can infer that such writings have direct practical aims, the interventionism I spoke of above. As Wollen later describes it, 'this was a time in which I (and others) wrote drafts of guidelines for possible futures under the pretext of theorizing contemporary film practice'.<sup>37</sup> Like many manifestos they have obvious aesthetic qualities, a stylistic interest not usually associated with theory when it is conceived as a sort of pure thought. Indeed, in the period my thesis examines we see an avant-garde impulse move into theory, as shown in the writings of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida, for example.<sup>38</sup> Theory itself offered Mulvey and Wollen a space for avant-gardism, no longer confined to artistic practices. Fourth, and finally, we might speak of theory itself as a kind of practice, specifically in terms of the Althusserian 'theoretical practice' that Mulvey and Wollen were certainly familiar with.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Originally published in the magazine *Bananas*, edited by Emma Tennant, these are collected in section three of Peter Wollen, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982)

<sup>36</sup> Wollen, 'Preface', *Readings and Writings*, p. vii

<sup>37</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Knight's Moves', *Public* 25 (Spring, 2002), p. 54

<sup>38</sup> Paul Willemen, 'An Avant Garde for the Eighties', *Framework* 24 (Spring, 1984), p. 65; Lupton, 'Discourses of Avant-Gardism', p. 53

<sup>39</sup> Louis Althusser, 'On the Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 2005), pp. 167-174. A debate over this term occurred in the French film criticism that

It is evident, then, that we cannot rely on a simplistic bifurcation of theory and practice, nor the unreflective identification of these two terms with writings and films. Indeed, both Pantenburg and Nicole Brenez note the way in which the ‘theory film’, or what Brenez calls the ‘visual study’, ‘actively contest, or even completely destroy, the traditional division of labor between art and criticism’.<sup>40</sup> In this, I am in agreement with Pantenburg and Brenez, hence my theorisation of Mulvey and Wollen’s theory films as interweaving poetic and metalingual functions, terms I take from Roman Jakobson. However, while Mulvey and Wollen’s work blurs any easy compartmentalisation of theory and practice, we cannot speak of their work as abolishing this distinction. In a passage acknowledging the problematisation of theory and practice that their films and writings effect, Wollen explicitly resists the collapse of the separation between object-language (that is, art) and metalanguage (that is, criticism or theory), which he discerns in Barthes and Derrida. Rather than responding to the need to surmount ‘[t]he division of labour between theory and practice’ incumbent upon ‘a counter-cultural strategy’ by ‘dissolv[ing] one into the other’, Wollen states that his strategy was ‘to work in both areas, and to explore some of the relations between them’.<sup>41</sup> In other words, although we cannot separate films and writings into mutually exclusive categories defined according to strictly divergent functions and techniques, they do offer up alternative potentials.

What is the relationship between Mulvey and Wollen’s films and writings, then? On the one hand, the writings are clearly groundwork for filmmaking practice,

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influenced Mulvey and Wollen. See Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, ‘Cinema/Ideology/Criticism (2)’, *Screen* 12:2 (Summer, 1971), pp. 148-155

<sup>40</sup> Nicole Brenez, ‘Recycling, Visual Study, Expanded Theory – Ken Jacobs, Theorist, or the Long Song of the Sons’, in Michele Pierson, David E. James and Paul Arthur (eds.), *Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 162. Pantenburg makes the same point, citing early German romantic thought as a precedent, in *Farocki/Godard*, pp. 34-35

<sup>41</sup> Wollen, ‘Preface’, p. vii

as Wollen summarises when he states that '[a]ny counter-language must be preceded by a meta-language'.<sup>42</sup> Theory must be elaborated in order to serve as guidance for artistic production; the meta-discourse of theory must precede the counter-discourse of the political avant-garde. This is clearly quite different from the relationship between the two proposed, for instance, by Trinh T. Minh-ha, who argues that one cannot 'theorise *about* film', a deadening process that seeks to 'carve out a place of expertise and of specialisation', but only 'philosophise *on* film, starting from film production, from the films themselves'.<sup>43</sup> For this reason we might argue that the slide from an experimental rethinking of film language in Mulvey and Wollen's early films towards a less critical usage of cinematic forms in their later works is attributable to a thinning of the theoretical foundation that had so visibly underwritten the first three. At the same time, Mulvey and Wollen's films exceed their writings. As Mulvey writes, '[t]heory and politics could be juxtaposed with narrative and visual poetics, reaching out beyond the limits of the written word and its precision to something that had not yet found a precise means of verbal articulation. The films could confront questions of film criticism with film itself, debate images with counter-images, intellectual strategies with visual play'.<sup>44</sup> It is the speculative potential of cinematic discourse, its openness and ambiguity in contradistinction to the greater specificity and univocality demanded of critical writing that is valuable. Hence the questioning mode of their films, highlighted in my thesis. More than this, the films have the potential to double back and even critique the writings, in a dialectical back and forth between the two. As Wollen

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Hermeneutic Code', *Readings and Writings*, p. 41. See also Peter Wollen, 'The Field of Language in Film', *October* 17 (Summer, 1981), p. 58

<sup>43</sup> *Trinh T. Minh-ha: an Interview*, Video Data Bank (interview by Pam Falkenberg, 1989)

<sup>44</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Introduction to the First Edition', *Visual and Other Pleasures*, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. xxix

states in an unpublished paper, ‘I was struck by an interesting question I was once asked – “You were saying that *Signs and Meaning* should be read in conjunction with viewing your films, weren’t you?” I responded as follows, “*Signs and Meaning* asks the question, ‘What kind of film should we make?’, which *Riddles* answers. And then *Riddles* asks, ‘So what kind of theory do we need?’”<sup>45</sup> Models for this relation may be found in the women’s movement, Marxism and psychoanalysis, all fields defined by the mutual criticism between the ‘practical’ on the one hand and the analytic, theoretical or reflective on the other. This indivisibility of theory and practice, whose difficult relation is dramatised in *Crystal Gazing*, provides a further reason for considering Mulvey and Wollen together.

The binaristic proclivities in Mulvey and Wollen’s work outlined above have come under extensive criticism, particularly given the postmodern and poststructuralist celebration of ‘difference’ that followed the period on which I focus.<sup>46</sup> Much of this criticism is valid; their binaries are often undeniably reductive. Nevertheless, there is a possible value in them. As, in different ways, Benjamin Noys and Gail Day argue,<sup>47</sup> negativity or negation have political utility, as acts of refusal, resistance or ‘necessary destruction’.<sup>48</sup> The program of counter-cinema, predicated on its opposition to ‘dominant cinema’, is one such practice of negation, with *Penthesilea* and ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ being the purest examples. Even if, as Mulvey says in an argument cited by Day, such negation

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Theory and Practice’, ‘Film Theory 4’, Item 102, Box B, Peter Wollen archive, BFI Special Collections, London

<sup>46</sup> For instance, Rodowick, *Crisis*, pp. 167 and 231. See also David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 117-118. Mulvey criticises her earlier binarism in ‘Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience’, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 167-169

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010); Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011)

<sup>48</sup> Noys, *Persistence of the Negative*, p. 4

cannot be thought outside the terms of that which it seeks to undermine, it opens a position of criticality and clears the ground on which alternative artistic and theoretical practices can build.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, there is a productive tension in some of these binaries, encapsulated most of all in Mulvey's phrase 'passionate detachment', which I take as the title of my third chapter. For what is indicated here is a dialectic of closeness and distance, impassioned intervention and rigorous study, enthusiastic commitment and uncompromising criticality, a dialectic that runs through their films and writings. As I indicate below, this is exemplary of Metz's description of the contradictory affect experienced by the cinephile turned critical film theorist: 'one should ideally no longer love the cinema and yet still love it'.<sup>50</sup> It is in this moment of tension that much of the most important writing on cinema has been forged – Serge Daney and Raymond Bellour, for instance, as well as Godard's films – it gives Mulvey and Wollen's work its force also.

In chapter one, 'Origins of a Collaboration', I sketch Mulvey and Wollen's early writings: Wollen's texts in *New Left Review*, his book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, and various short, scattered articles by Mulvey in socialist and feminist publications, in which the critique of patriarchal representation of which 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' is the most famous example begins to be elucidated. There I also lay out some of the pertinent contexts for their work, which implicitly underpin chapters two to four, which focus more on textual analyses, although even in those chapters I insert, where relevant, discussion of organisational or political matters, notably the foundation of the IFA.

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<sup>49</sup> Mulvey, 'Changes', pp. 170-171; Day, *Dialectical Passions*, p. 8

<sup>50</sup> Christian Metz, 'The Imaginary Signifier', trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen* 16:2 (Summer, 1975), p. 26



Chapter two, 'Semiotics/Ideology/Counter-cinema' focuses principally on Wollen's writing of the early 1970s, developing connections between works in order to map out Wollen's delineation of a genealogy, theory and inventory of strategies for a political, formally experimental cinema. This forms much of the basis for *Penthesilea*, which I turn to at the end of this chapter, although I also link discussion back to Mulvey's writing of the early 1970s, examined in chapter one.

In my third chapter, 'Passionate Detachment', I focus on two of the three fundamental dimensions of Mulvey's work of the 1970s, her critique of classical Hollywood cinema in 'Visual Pleasure' and her feminist rehabilitation of melodrama. In the same chapter I re-present the arguments of Wollen's 'The Two Avant-Gardes', before reconstructing the artistic and intellectual conjuncture to which its meaning is inextricably tied, drawing out in particular the submerged importance of feminist avant-garde filmmaking, thus connecting back to Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure' arguments.

Chapter four, 'Film in the House of the Word', continues in the same vein. I begin with *Riddles of the Sphinx*, before examining the final element in the triumvirate that defines Mulvey's writing of the 1970s, the intersection between feminism and the avant-garde. In the final section of this chapter I reprise the themes of my discussion of 'The Two Avant-Gardes' in a more philosophical register, extrapolating the theoretical foundation that underpins the earlier essay through a discussion of various writings by Wollen from the late 1970s and early 1980s. The title of that subsection, 'And the words? Look', drawn from Godard and Miéville's *Comment ça va?* (1976), is supposed to connote not merely the reductive opposition of word and image that Wollen's writing of this time sometimes falls into, but also the viewer's activities of reading and looking, thus alluding to Mulvey and Wollen's

different emphases, on the spectator and work respectively. Unfortunately, due to space constraints I have been unable to develop there the debate – implicit and explicit – between Wollen and Peter Gidal over narrative and material, nor to extensively explore the range of Wollen’s investigations into cinema’s narrative grammar and material basis, a necessary endeavour for fully understanding Wollen’s thinking at this time.

Chapter five, ““They Had Damaged the Map to Dreamland””, has the highest concentration of film analysis, given that Mulvey and Wollen made four films between 1980 and 1983 (although two of these are shorts). Here I draw in contextual matters in similar fashion to chapter one, given the historic reconfiguration these works bear witness to. My chapter title, a quotation from *Crystal Gazing*, crystallises the pessimism and loss of direction at this time in the left-wing counterculture of which Mulvey and Wollen were a part. I also examine Mulvey’s 1981 reassessment of ‘Visual Pleasure’. In my conclusion, I sketch more of the transformations of the mid-1980s and their impact on Mulvey and Wollen, before reflecting on the method and aims of studying the radical art and theory of an earlier epoch.

Through a series of detailed analyses of texts and films, then, I consider the significance, the stakes and the possibilities opened by this body of work. I scrutinise Mulvey and Wollen’s texts separately in order to carry out close readings and emphasise the way the two theorists have distinctive interests, methods and positions. At the same time, I carefully trace the interweaving threads between and within Mulvey and Wollen’s writings, and between these writings and their films, showing how their films are the terrain on which exchange between their distinct concerns takes place. This is with a view to using these interrelations between theory and practice, and between individual and collaborative works, to reflect on questions

of authorship and the place of aesthetic theory in relation to cultural production. Although I deliberately range widely, tending towards a comprehensive cartography of their work by attending to texts that have in some cases received no previous scholarly attention rather than producing a more selective argument out of these materials, I focus on what I take to be the major components, influences and fascinations of Mulvey and Wollen's aesthetics – semiotics, psychoanalysis, Eisenstein, melodrama, spectatorship, Godard, Althusser, and so on. Despite not proposing a single overarching argument in my thesis, I present a narrative arc, as the mutually productive relationship between theory and practice developed in the early 1970s falls away in the early 1980s, a trajectory which itself runs in parallel to the coalescence and then emaciation of a radical, independent film culture in Britain at this time. By collecting, ordering, framing and elucidating materials, I seek to make a contribution to the larger scholarly reevaluation of this period of film theory and its accompanying experimental filmmaking practice.

# 1. Origins of a Collaboration

## The Writings of ‘Lee Russell’

In 1969 Peter Wollen published *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, the work that brought him to prominence. In the five years before, however, Wollen had been publishing regularly in *New Left Review* under two pseudonyms, ‘Lee Russell’ and ‘Lucien Rey’, writing on a number of subjects under the latter but reserving the former exclusively for cinema. The core of the Lee Russell *oeuvre* is a series of thumbnail accounts, published between 1964 and 1967, describing and evaluating the thematic and, to a lesser extent, stylistic ambit of eleven directors: Samuel Fuller, Howard Hawks, Jean Renoir, Stanley Kubrick, John Ford, Louis Malle, Budd Boetticher, Alfred Hitchcock, Josef von Sternberg, Jean-Luc Godard and Roberto Rossellini.<sup>1</sup> Along with Wollen’s first text under the same pseudonym in 1963,<sup>2</sup> these sketch out many of the concerns that resurface in Wollen’s later work and help us to understand his development. In this opening section, then, I will delineate the themes, method, influences and contexts of the ‘early Wollen’.

The first striking feature is pseudonymity. To explain this a biographical aside is necessary: after studying English Literature at Oxford between 1956 and 1959,<sup>3</sup> Wollen was called up for national service and, at some point, went absent without leave. Fearing that he might be traced, Wollen left the UK. He went to Paris, where he worked in George Whitman’s Shakespeare and Company bookshop and

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<sup>1</sup> Republished as ‘The Writings of Lee Russell’, an appendix to the fourth edition of Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: BFI, 1998), and again in the fifth edition (London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 151-199. I cite the original *New Left Review* publications

<sup>2</sup> Lee Russell [pseudonym for Peter Wollen], ‘Culture and Cinema’, *New Left Review* 1/21 (October 1963), pp. 112-115

<sup>3</sup> Wollen was born in 1938. See Serge Guilbaut and Scott Watson, ‘From an Interview with Peter Wollen’ [13 January, 2001], online at <http://www.belkin.ubc.ca/archived/lastcall/current/page1.html> (accessed 13th October, 2013); and Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen with Lee Grieveson, ‘From Cinephilia to Film Studies’, in Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (eds.), *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 221

‘saw a lot of the New Wave films’.<sup>4</sup> He then lived in Tehran for about a year (probably in 1962 and 1963) and later in Rome, with Laura Mulvey and Jon Halliday, working with the latter on Lelio Basso’s *International Socialist Journal*.<sup>5</sup> In between stays abroad Wollen returned to the UK; it was on returning from Tehran that he wrote his first *New Left Review* piece.<sup>6</sup> The initial impetus for writing under a *nom de plume* was therefore the pragmatic one of avoiding arrest for desertion.<sup>7</sup> When offered a job in the BFI Education Department by Paddy Whannel in 1966, Wollen resumed his real name (conscription in the UK had ended by this point), although he continued to write as Lee Russell for a couple more years and occasionally returned to his Lucien Rey alias in the 1970s.

While Wollen’s desertion explains the initial necessity of pseudonymity, it does not explain its operation in his work. First, Wollen claims that utilising two pseudonyms enabled him to be taken seriously on different topics.<sup>8</sup> This was not an exceptional tactic at *New Left Review* in this period, as Perry Anderson’s article on the Rolling Stones under the alias ‘Richard Merton’ demonstrates.<sup>9</sup> While ‘Lee Russell’ is only for cinema, the writings attributed to Lucien Rey range more widely, from global politics to the poetry of Franco Fortini.<sup>10</sup> The name ‘Lucien Rey’ sounds

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<sup>4</sup> Guilbaut and Watson, ‘From an Interview with Peter Wollen’

<sup>5</sup> Guilbaut and Watson, ‘From an Interview with Peter Wollen’; Mulvey and Wollen with Grieveson, ‘From Cinephilia to Film Studies’, p. 224; Laura Mulvey, ‘Introduction to the Second Edition’, in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. xiv

<sup>6</sup> Lucien Rey [pseudonym for Peter Wollen], ‘Persia in Perspective’, *New Left Review* I/19 (March-April 1963), pp. 32-55

<sup>7</sup> This is mentioned in Robin Blackburn, ‘Benedict Anderson’, online at <http://www.ssrc.org/pages/benedict-anderson/> (accessed 11 October, 2013)

<sup>8</sup> Guilbaut and Watson, ‘From an Interview with Peter Wollen’

<sup>9</sup> Richard Merton [pseudonym for Perry Anderson], ‘Comment on Beckett’s “Stones”’, *New Left Review* I/47 (January-February 1968), pp. 29-31

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Lucien Rey [pseudonym for Peter Wollen], ‘The Italian Presidential Elections’, *New Left Review* I/30 (March-April 1965), pp. 48-52, and Lucien Rey, ‘Franco Fortini’, *New Left Review* I/38 (July-August 1966), pp. 79-80. Wollen’s book reviews in *New Left Review*, attributed to ‘L.R.’, provide a snapshot of his interests in this period, for instance William S. Burroughs and the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet. See L.R., ‘Nazim Hikmet’, *New Left Review* I/23 (Jan-Feb 1964), pp. 58-59, and L.R., ‘Dead Fingers Talk’, *New Left Review* I/23, pp. 104-105

European, cosmopolitan, matching the international purview and literary flavour of his writing, while ‘Lee Russell’ could be an actor or character in a Western or film noir. Texts by Rey on literature demonstrate an interest in the issues posed by being both a socialist and an artist. There is a division of labour between Rey and Russell that disappears once Wollen begins to write under his own name, as the problems of leftist politics and art, and the relation of these to the avant-garde, are posed together in the field of film.

Second, pseudonymity allowed a game with authorship. The pseudonyms allude to each other through their initials. The names are a citational play with other writers, dissolving the author-figure into a series of references: Wollen explains the source of ‘Lee’ as William S. Burroughs’s pen name William Lee, and that perhaps ‘Russell’ came from Bertrand Russell;<sup>11</sup> one can hypothesise that the inspiration for ‘Lucien’ was Lucien Goldmann, whose influence on Wollen’s early work is described below. Thirty years later, an afterword added to the fourth edition of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* is staged as an interview of Wollen by Russell, the author interrogated by his alter ego, the two addressing each other in the second person (*SM*, 211-248). Through these techniques, Wollen begins to examine and take apart authorship, even as the Russell texts construct cinematic *auteurs*.

The initials ‘L.R.’ are the same as ‘Left Review’, alerting us to the relevance of where these texts were published. ‘Lucien Rey’ was on the editorial board of *New Left Review* from 1964 as well as having responsibility for editing the journal’s ‘Motifs’ section, which dealt with art and culture, juxtaposing texts on cinema by himself and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith with writing on free jazz and Luigi Nono.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Guilbaut and Watson, ‘From an Interview with Peter Wollen’

<sup>12</sup> Like Wollen, Nowell-Smith went from *New Left Review* in the early to mid-1960s to *Screen* in the 1970s, passing through a structuralist phase on the way

This chronology means that Wollen's involvement with *New Left Review* dates from after Perry Anderson became editor in 1962, at which point the journal became, among other changes, more scholarly and austere than under the editorship of Stuart Hall, as well according a regular space to the discussion of art and culture.<sup>13</sup> When describing the specificity of *New Left Review* under his editorship, Anderson has drawn attention to the centrality of Wollen's work.<sup>14</sup> Three main features of the post-1962 *New Left Review* as a whole can be observed in in microcosm in Wollen's pseudonymous texts.

First, a thoroughgoing and polemical reevaluation of British culture, typified by a disparagement of native intellectual and political resources. 'Britain, the most conservative major society in Europe, has a culture in its own image: mediocre and inert', Anderson wrote in 'Components of the National Culture', a judgment representative of the journal's position throughout the 1960s.<sup>15</sup> Wollen notes that *New Left Review* 'had a "national nihilist" streak in those happy days, a wonderful leaning towards dismissing everything English' (*SM*, 243). Wollen's first Russell essay, 'Culture and Cinema', is an assault on precisely the 'ideology of stupefied traditionalism and empiricism, an anti-ideology which is the enemy of all ideas and all calculation' that Anderson diagnosed in the culture at large.<sup>16</sup> The Russell writings ignore British filmmakers entirely, with the exception of Hitchcock, whose British, pre-Hollywood films Wollen denigrates.<sup>17</sup> Second, concomitant with this

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<sup>13</sup> Mulvey and Wollen with Grieveson, 'From Cinephilia to Film Studies', pp. 223-224

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Perry Anderson, 'Renewals', *New Left Review* 1 (January-February 2000), p. 5. See also the video interview with Anderson by Harry Kreisler, 'Reflections on the Left from the Left' in the UC Berkeley 'Conversations with History' series, online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjTKsRfVM9Q> (accessed 18th November, 2013)

<sup>15</sup> Perry Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', *New Left Review* I/50 (January-February 1968), p. 4

<sup>16</sup> Perry Anderson, 'Problems of Socialist Strategy', in Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn (eds.), *Towards Socialism* (London: Collins, 1965), p. 265

<sup>17</sup> Lee Russell, 'Alfred Hitchcock', *New Left Review* I/35 (January-February 1966), p. 92

was a new internationalism and cosmopolitan attitude, manifesting itself in a concern with popular culture originating from the United States and, notably, a focus on European intellectual production as a way out of the British impasse, exemplified by translations of continental thought, primarily works of French and Italian Marxism.<sup>18</sup> In Wollen's case, this meant the exploration of Hollywood cinema and the incorporation of methods drawing on the French Marxist Lucien Goldmann and the '*politique des auteurs*' ('author policy') of the French film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*. Third, Anderson's editorship evinced an 'insistence on the priority of ideas, tending to an intellectualism', as Duncan Thompson states.<sup>19</sup> This persistent stress led, at times, to a political strategy emphasising the vanguard role of intellectuals.<sup>20</sup> Wollen, similarly, shifts the terrain of *auteur* analysis from a director's style to his ideas, his worldview; meanwhile, the appellation 'intellectual' was a crucial part of Wollen's self-definition from the 1960s onwards, part of an attempt to forge a critical, political role outside of traditional academic institutions.<sup>21</sup>

Cinephilia is central to Wollen's work from the beginning. It was Wollen who introduced Mulvey to 'serious cinema-going' in the early 1960s.<sup>22</sup> Mulvey has evoked the years that followed, when the two of them went to the cinema almost religiously, in her later writing.<sup>23</sup> The directors Wollen chooses to profile reflect a canon strongly influenced by the Parisian cinephilia typified by *Cahiers du cinéma*: Rossellini and Renoir in Europe, Hitchcock, Ford and Hawks in Hollywood.<sup>24</sup> This cinephilia – by which I mean both a specific (now classical) canon and a desire for

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<sup>18</sup> Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect? A History of New Left Review* (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), p. 16

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?*, p. 39

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, 'Problems of Socialist Strategy', p. 270

<sup>21</sup> Guilbaut and Watson, 'From an Interview with Peter Wollen'

<sup>22</sup> Mulvey, 'Introduction to the Second Edition', p. xiii

<sup>23</sup> Mulvey, 'Introduction to the Second Edition', pp. xiii-xiv

<sup>24</sup> Wollen states that '[l]ooking back, the major influence comes from *Cahiers du Cinéma*'. Guilbaut and Watson, 'From an Interview with Peter Wollen'



cinema that far exceeds the bounds of academic study, as described by writers such as Thomas Elsaesser,<sup>25</sup> Christian Keathley<sup>26</sup> and Paul Willemen<sup>27</sup> – is always foundational to Wollen’s (and Mulvey’s) writing and filmmaking: ‘[m]y cinephilia, my obsessive love of the great old Hollywood films, never ever left me. [...] At some level, cinephilia simply transcended the politics of art or the aesthetics of the avant-garde. That same cinephilia, after all, was really the basis of my conviction that cinema is an art’ (*SM*, 237). Wollen’s work demonstrates something Serge Daney has described when speaking of the trajectory of *Cahiers du cinéma* through the 1960s and 1970s (one that closely parallels Wollen’s own): ‘[t]his criticism was obviously a last homage, more or less avowed, that we rendered to what we have always loved. We wanted to reread Ford, not [John] Huston, to dissect [Robert] Bresson and not Rene Clair, to psychoanalyze [André] Bazin and not Pauline Kael. Criticism is always that: an eternal return to a fundamental pleasure’.<sup>28</sup> The directors Wollen writes about as Russell will reappear, refracted, in the following years. Sternberg emerges two years later as the key exemplar of ‘iconic’ (in C. S. Peirce’s sense) filmmaking. Hitchcock resurfaces in the 1969 essay ‘Hitchcock’s Vision’, where vision now refers not only to worldview but to the organ of sight, developed through Freudian categories of scopophilia and voyeurism.<sup>29</sup> Fuller is given a structuralist reworking in 1969, as are Hawks and Ford in *Signs and Meaning in the*

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Cinephilia, or the Uses of Disenchantment’, in Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (eds.), *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), pp. 27-43

<sup>26</sup> Christian Keathley, ‘The Cinephiliac Moment’, *Framework* 42, online at [http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/32cb69\\_3ba21383aae34be5a6869fe8e4342f84.pdf](http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/32cb69_3ba21383aae34be5a6869fe8e4342f84.pdf) (accessed 7 January, 2018)

<sup>27</sup> Paul Willemen, ‘Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered’, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 223-257

<sup>28</sup> Serge Daney, ‘Les Cahiers du Cinema 1968-1977’ (interview with Bill Krohn), trans. Bill Krohn, online at [http://home.earthlink.net/~steevee/Daney\\_1977.html](http://home.earthlink.net/~steevee/Daney_1977.html) (accessed 13th November, 2013)

<sup>29</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Hitchcock’s Vision’, *Cinema* 1:3 (June 1969)

*Cinema*. Even in the 1970s, alongside ‘The Two Avant Gardes’ and *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Wollen wrote about *North by Northwest* and *Citizen Kane*, though subjecting these to quite different critical frameworks to those he used in the 1960s. As Elsaesser argues, the “‘negative’ or disavowed cinephilia’ of 1960s cinephiles became ‘one of the founding moments’ of the theoretical investigation of film that emerged in Britain and the United States in the 1970s.<sup>30</sup>

*Cahiers du cinéma* also equipped Wollen with a method: the ‘*politique des auteurs*’, an approach to Hollywood based on identifying certain directors as artists, foregrounding aesthetics rather than the institutional analysis that would come to underpin the discipline of cultural studies. (In this last respect, we can see the difference between Wollen’s approach and that of Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel’s book *The Popular Arts*, with its sections on ‘The Western’ and ‘John Ford’, published the same year as the first of the Russell director studies, a founding text of cultural studies.)<sup>31</sup> It is via Andre Bazin’s appraisal of it that the *politique des auteurs* enters Wollen’s work. As Bazin writes in a passage quoted by Wollen, the *politique* risks producing an ‘aesthetic cult of personality’, but has the benefit of ‘treating the cinema as an adult art and of reacting against the impressionist relativism which still dominates criticism of the film’.<sup>32</sup> Like Bazin, what Wollen draws from the *politique* is not a ‘party line’ or ‘dogma’ as to which filmmakers are valuable, as in Dwight MacDonald’s polemic against the US *auteurist* critic Andrew Sarris,<sup>33</sup> but a method for making cinema criticism systematic and precise. By

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<sup>30</sup> Elsaesser, ‘Cinephilia, or the Uses of Disenchantment’, p. 32

<sup>31</sup> Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (London: Hutchinson Educational, 1964). Wollen acknowledges the importance of this book: see Mulvey and Wollen with Grieveson, ‘From Cinephilia to Film Studies’, p. 218

<sup>32</sup> André Bazin, ‘On the *politique des auteurs*’, in Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma, the 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 256, originally ‘De la politique des auteurs’, *Cahiers du cinéma* 70 (April, 1957)

<sup>33</sup> Dwight MacDonald, ‘Films of the Quarter’, *Film Quarterly* 17:1 (Autumn, 1963), p. 55

establishing the thematic and formal parameters of a director, one can pinpoint the differences between, say, Fuller and Boetticher, in a production system set up to encourage directorial anonymity. Together, these studies will add up to a map of contemporary cinema. This indicates a distance from the positions of Sarris and of the so-called *Cahiers* ‘young Turks’ – Godard, Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette – whose writing is lower on analysis and higher on exaggerated declarations than Wollen’s.

For *Cahiers*, *auteurs* were primarily conceived of as expressing themselves through their use of *mise en scène*.<sup>34</sup> As Wollen notes, however, his own position was different: ‘[i]n the way the *Cahiers* critics described it, auteurs had a specific *style* of filmmaking, but the way I saw it, they had a specific world-view, and that concept – “world-view” – came from Lucien Goldmann’.<sup>35</sup> Wollen was familiar with the work of Goldmann at least as early as 1964;<sup>36</sup> in his 1965 article on Boetticher he refers extensively to ideas in Goldmann’s chapter on Malraux in his book of the previous year, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*.<sup>37</sup> For Goldmann, ‘[t]he great writer (or artist) is precisely the exceptional individual who succeeds in creating in a given domain, that of the literary (or pictorial, conceptual, musical, etc.) work, an imaginary, coherent, or almost strictly coherent world’.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Wollen writes about directors such as Boetticher and Rossellini having a way of seeing reality characterised by ‘homogeneity’ or ‘consistency’.<sup>39</sup> Kubrick’s world is

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<sup>34</sup> Jim Hillier, ‘Introduction: *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1960s’, in Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma, 1960-1968: New Wave, New Cinema, Reevaluating Hollywood* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 2

<sup>35</sup> Guilbaut and Watson, ‘From an Interview with Peter Wollen’

<sup>36</sup> L.R. [pseudonym for Peter Wollen], ‘The Long Shadow’, *NLR* I/25 (May-June 1964), p. 93

<sup>37</sup> Lee Russell, ‘Budd Boetticher’, *New Left Review* I/32 (July-August 1965), pp. 80 and 82; see Lucien Goldmann, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Tavistock, 1975), originally *Pour un sociologie du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964)

<sup>38</sup> Goldmann, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, p. 60

<sup>39</sup> Russell, ‘Boetticher’, p. 78; Lee Russell, ‘Roberto Rossellini’, *New Left Review* I/42 (March-April 1967), p. 69

a 'dehumanized' one in which 'human passions are fatuous',<sup>40</sup> for instance, while Fuller's is 'a violent world, a world of conflict'.<sup>41</sup>

As with the *politique*, Goldmann's concept appears as a way to increase the rigour of film scholarship.<sup>42</sup> Its most important function, however, is to make the *politique* political by enabling Wollen to do *auteur* criticism without slipping into an a-social mode. For Goldmann, the class speaks through the author because it speaks through all individuals: '[a]lmost no human actions are performed by isolated individuals for the subject performing the action is a group, a "We", and not an "I", even though, by the phenomenon of reification, the present structure of society tends to hide the "We"'.<sup>43</sup> The great writer's world-view 'is that towards which the whole group is tending'.<sup>44</sup> Wollen links directors to the perspective of a social group and its class consciousness: Fuller 'represents a far point of bourgeois romantic-nationalist consciousness, in which its contradictions are clearly exposed',<sup>45</sup> while 'Ford's political thought springs from Jacksonian populism, reflecting its criss-crossing strands of liberalism and conservatism'.<sup>46</sup>

This political tenor highlights the difference in perspective between Wollen and the writers of *Movie*, a magazine founded in the same British conjuncture in 1962, in response to similar enthusiasms and dissatisfactions to those that formed Wollen's thinking on cinema. Wollen and the *Movie* contributors shared a *Cahiers*-influenced *auteurism* and cinephilia, an emphasis on directorial worldview, and a

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<sup>40</sup> Lee Russell, 'Stanley Kubrick', *New Left Review* 1/26 (July-August 1964), p. 72

<sup>41</sup> Lee Russell, 'Samuel Fuller', *New Left Review* 1/23 (January-February 1964), p. 87

<sup>42</sup> See Goldmann's comments on making the study of literature more scientific in *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, p. ix

<sup>43</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. Philip Thody (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul and Humanities Press, 1964), p. 16

<sup>44</sup> Goldmann, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, p. 160

<sup>45</sup> Russell, 'Fuller', p. 87

<sup>46</sup> Lee Russell, 'John Ford', *New Left Review* 1/29 (January-February 1965), p. 70

hostility to highbrow critical disdain of Hollywood. V. F. Perkins and Ian Cameron, founder-editors of *Movie*, were on the BFI Action Committee with Wollen, united in antagonism towards the positions of BFI management, while *Movie* writer Robin Wood directed a polemic, like Wollen, against *Sight and Sound* editor Penelope Houston.<sup>47</sup> An objective alliance could exist here until the early 1970s because of the progressive political, artistic and intellectual role cinephilia played for a time in Britain, attacking the complacent tastes of bourgeois liberal humanism;<sup>48</sup> once this necessary work was complete, *Movie*'s continued commitment to traditional conceptions of artistry and expression took on a retrograde character in comparison with the increasingly radical trajectory of Wollen and the journal *Screen*. Even in 1966, the difference of perspective is clear from an exchange between Wollen and Wood. Significantly, the battleground here is the work of Godard. Godard will be a recurring critical concern for Wollen – and to a lesser extent, Mulvey – and a powerful influence on their filmmaking. Through the following decade, Godard's work would be a privileged site of struggle in British film culture between 'new' and 'old' critical approaches.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'The 1970 Crisis at the BFI and its Aftermath', *Screen* 47:4 (Winter, 2006), p. 457; Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films* (London and New York: A. Zwemmer and A. S. Barnes, 1965), pp. 13-15

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Two Decades in Another Country: Hollywood and the Cinephiles', in C.W.E. Bigsby (ed.), *Superculture: American Popular Culture and Europe* (London: Elek, 1975), p. 212. Mattias Frey writes that 'the implosion of reigning middle-class standards, the mix of high and low culture' exemplified by *Cahiers du cinéma* 'disturbed *Sight and Sound*'. Mattias Frey, 'The Critical Question: *Sight and Sound*'s Postwar Consolidation of Liberal Taste', *Screen*, 54: 2 (Summer 2013), p. 205

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, the comparison of Wollen's 'Godard and Counter Cinema' and V. F. Perkins' criticisms of *Vivre sa vie* in order to stage a confrontation between divergent theories and methods in Christine Gledhill, 'Notes on a Summer School: Godard, Criticism and Education', *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 67-74; and Andrew Britton's use of Godard as a means into attacking Wollen and Colin MacCabe in 'Living Historically: Two Films by Jean-Luc Godard', *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), pp. 358-363, originally in *Framework* 3 (Spring, 1976)

Wollen denies Wood's claim that Godard 'rejects society because society, as he sees it, has rejected tradition'.<sup>50</sup> For Godard, according to Wollen, society itself is characterised by violence and vandalism.<sup>51</sup> As Wollen is aware, this interpretative divergence is the result of methodological difference: Wood's positive reference to tradition is the result of the influence of F. R. Leavis.<sup>52</sup> An anti-Leavisite position on culture is, in fact, a *New Left Review* leitmotif of the time, articulated in its most extended form by Anderson in 'Components of the National Culture',<sup>53</sup> and one that would be taken up by *Screen*.<sup>54</sup> Against the violence and vandalism constitutive of tradition, Wollen writes, Godard proposes 'the romantic answers of beauty, action and contemplation'.<sup>55</sup> Godard places himself in opposition to society, a position with which Wollen is in sympathy: '[t]radition is the enemy. The tradition of our society, it would be hard to deny, is violence, vandalism, oppression, and its developing sanctions the advertiser's copy and the carabinieri's gun'.<sup>56</sup> But Godard's solutions of 'beauty, action and contemplation' point to the absence of politics in his early films. 'To be dissatisfied', Wollen writes, 'after all, is to want change. Politics is the principle of change in history; when we abandon it nothing remains except the scattered, expendable efforts of artists and romantics'.<sup>57</sup> The reply to Wood illustrates the parameters of the critical stance Wollen will maintain in all his future writing, setting himself against tradition and wholeness and instead advocating a

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<sup>50</sup> Robin Wood, 'Jean-Luc Godard', *New Left Review* I/39 (September-October 1966), p. 80

<sup>51</sup> Lee Russell, 'Reply', *New Left Review* I/39, p. 84

<sup>52</sup> Russell, 'Reply', p. 84

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', pp. 50-56

<sup>54</sup> Sam Rohdie, 'Review: *Movie Reader, Film as Film*', *Screen* 13:4 (Winter, 1972), pp. 135-136, 138, 141. Wollen himself describes the treatment of *Movie* and Perkins in this review as an 'onslaught'. See Peter Wollen, "'Structuralism implies a certain kind of methodology...'" (interview with Gerald Peary and Stuart Kaminsky), *Film Heritage*, 9:4 (Fall 1974), p. 24

<sup>55</sup> Russell, 'Reply', p. 84

<sup>56</sup> Russell, 'Reply', p. 87

<sup>57</sup> Russell, 'Reply', p. 87. By 1970, Godard was making the same criticisms of himself. See Trevor Stark, "'Cinema in the Hands of the People": Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film', *October* 139 (Winter, 2012), p. 139

modernist valorisation of rupture, contradiction and critical revaluation of the past. It also predicts the future development of Godard's filmmaking towards an explicit address of political questions, a turn which will be a crucial reference point for Wollen's films with Mulvey.

Dotted through the Russell texts are subjects that take on resonance when one knows the pattern of Wollen's later development – Brecht, Eisenstein, Mexico. The final Lee Russell article, 1968's 'Cinema – Code and Image',<sup>58</sup> is contemporaneous with Wollen's first cinema writings under his own name, and was republished the following year as the chapter 'The Semiology of Cinema' in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. The double publication of the essay signals the continuity between Lee Russell and Peter Wollen, highlighting the way in which *Signs and Meaning* is a transitional text between the 1960s positions I have just described and Wollen's work of the 1970s. It is to *Signs and Meaning* that I now turn.

### ***Signs and Meaning in the Cinema and the Late 1960s***

*Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* is a paradigmatic example of what Mark Betz calls 'little books': small format, illustrated publications exemplifying a lively cinephile culture, which provided the foundation upon which academic film studies constructed itself.<sup>59</sup> *Signs and Meaning* was published in the 'Cinema One' series published by the BFI between 1967 and 1976, during what Betz calls the 'golden age' of little books.<sup>60</sup> As Head of Publications in the BFI Education Department from 1966 until 1969, Wollen was responsible for commissioning numerous Cinema

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<sup>58</sup> Lee Russell, 'Cinema – Code and Image', *New Left Review* 1/49 (May-June 1968), pp. 65-81

<sup>59</sup> Mark Betz, 'Little Books', in *Inventing Film Studies*, p. 326

<sup>60</sup> Betz, 'Little Books', p. 324

One titles.<sup>61</sup> ‘Theory’, as it intersected with cinephilia, was the defining feature of the books Wollen commissioned.<sup>62</sup> Betz draws attention to the distinctive clapperboard insignia on the covers, which would recur in the later Edinburgh Film Festival books, the trace of a primal cinephilic impulse animating film culture, even as it moved towards ideology critique, theory, and the understanding of film as a social practice.<sup>63</sup> Here I want to use *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* as a way into Wollen’s work of the late 1960s, drawing in other writings. The latter have received little attention and fill out the picture of Wollen’s thinking.

Moreover, the contexts in which these texts of the late 1960s were produced and circulated map the co-ordinates of what Alan Lovell described as the oppositional faction within an already ‘minority film culture’ that developed in Britain from the 1960s onwards, particularly in the wake of May 1968.<sup>64</sup> The aforementioned BFI Education Department forms one important context. The department’s role was to provide resources to film teachers, in the form of film extracts, information, publications and so on.<sup>65</sup> In addition, the department sought to promote a wider ‘film culture’.<sup>66</sup> It operated, as its head Paddy Whannel noted, ‘like a university department’,<sup>67</sup> with staff members prominent in the study of film, such as Alan Lovell and V. F. Perkins, producing and sharing research. Indeed, its function as an experimental lab for testing approaches, and the fact that many former staff became well-known academics, make Terry Bolas’s description of it as an

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<sup>61</sup> The other half were commissioned by writers associated with *Sight and Sound*. There were hostile relations between the two departments. See Wollen, “‘Structuralism implies’”, pp. 22-23 and Betz, p. 326

<sup>62</sup> Betz, ‘Little Books’, p. 326

<sup>63</sup> Betz, ‘Little Books’, p. 333

<sup>64</sup> Alan Lovell, ‘Notes on British Film Culture’, *Screen* 13:2 (Summer, 1972), p. 10

<sup>65</sup> Alan Lovell, ‘The BFI and Film Education’, *Screen*, 12:3 (Autumn 1971), pp. 16-17

<sup>66</sup> A useful definition of this term as the Education Department understood it is given in Lovell, ‘BFI and Film Education’, p. 17

<sup>67</sup> Terry Bolas, *Screen Education: From Film Appreciation to Media Studies* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2009), p. 165



‘academy-in-waiting’ appropriate.<sup>68</sup> In 1967, Wollen instigated a series of departmental seminars.<sup>69</sup> Papers were given by department members, as well as outsiders like Robin Wood, Sam Rohdie and *New Left Review* editorial board member Tom Nairn.<sup>70</sup> The seminars acted as a workshop where questions of film genre, for instance, could interact with structuralist and semiotic approaches. Wollen himself presented ‘Cinema and Semiology: Some Points of Contact’ for the first time there, as well an early version of the Eisenstein chapter from *Signs and Meaning* and a paper on communications theory.<sup>71</sup>

The second pertinent context is the Edinburgh Film Festival. The festival had been transformed by David Will and Lynda Myles, who had become part of the festival staff in 1968.<sup>72</sup> Will and Myles were ‘self-declared cinephiles’: readers of *Cahiers*, *Positif*, *Movie* and Andrew Sarris, who had visited Paris to attend screenings at the Cinémathèque Française frequented by the *Cahiers* critics.<sup>73</sup> With Will, Wollen organised a retrospective of Fuller at the 1969 festival, which staked a claim for Fuller as a major American director. Will and Wollen also edited an essay collection to go along with the screenings.<sup>74</sup> This was the first in a series of Edinburgh Film Festival publications tied to director retrospectives, another set of ‘little books’ that would exist until the mid-1970s. (In 1972 Mulvey would co-edit

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<sup>68</sup> Bolas, *Screen Education*, p. 145

<sup>69</sup> Wollen, “‘Structuralism implies’”, p. 23; Peter Wollen, ‘Towards a new criticism? The first series of Film Seminars’, *Screen Education* 41 (Sep/Oct 1967), pp. 90-91

<sup>70</sup> Mulvey and Wollen with Grieveson, ‘From Cinephilia to Film Studies’, p. 220; Bolas, *Screen Education*, p. 166; Wollen, “‘Structuralism implies’”, p. 23

<sup>71</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Eisenstein’s Aesthetics’, paper presented to BFI Education Department seminar, 16 November, 1967; Peter Wollen, ‘The Concept of Communication(s): Draft for Discussion’, paper presented to BFI Education Department seminar, 15 May, 1969. Several BFI Education Department seminar papers were published in Peter Wollen (ed.), *Working Papers in the Cinema: Sociology and Semiology* (London: British Film Institute, 1969)

<sup>72</sup> Matthew Lloyd, *How the Movie Brats Took over Edinburgh: The Impact of Cinephilia on the Edinburgh International Film Festival, 1968-1980* (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2011), pp. 36-37

<sup>73</sup> Lloyd, *Movie Brats*, p. 37

<sup>74</sup> David Will and Peter Wollen (eds.), *Samuel Fuller* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival in association with Scottish International Review, 1969)

one on Douglas Sirk.) These books subjected individual Hollywood directors (Roger Corman, Frank Tashlin, Raoul Walsh and Jacques Tourneur as well as Fuller and Sirk) to analyses inspired by structuralism, semiotics, psychoanalysis and Marxism, until the *auteur* collapsed under the strain. They are symptomatic of how, from 1969 to the mid-1970s, the festival ‘harness[ed] cinéphilia to an oppositional culture’, in Paul Willemen’s words, a description applicable to Wollen’s late 1960s work.<sup>75</sup>

Third, there was a proliferation in Britain during this period of small, independent film publications such as *Brighton Film Review* (published by Sussex University Film Society and edited by Thomas Elsaesser, 1968-1971 – shifting to London and becoming *Monogram* in 1971), *Cinim* (associated with the London Film-Makers Co-op, 1966-1969), *Kinema* (Nottingham, 1968-1971) and *Cinema* (published in Cambridge, 1968-1971). Wollen published in the latter in 1969.<sup>76</sup> Like the books Betz examines, these ‘little magazines’ were a space in which cinephilic enthusiasms of various kinds, whether for art cinema, the avant-garde or classical Hollywood, could intersect with novel critical methods. Such publications sat alongside *New Left Review*, whose continued relevance to alternative film culture can be seen not only in its original publication of one of the chapters of *Signs and Meaning*, but also the debate that ensued in the magazine between Ben Brewster and Sam Rohdie in response to Wollen’s book.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, *Screen*, whose editorial board Wollen would join and which acted as the most important outlet for Wollen’s writing in the 1970s, was founded in 1969.<sup>78</sup> Published by the Society for Education

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<sup>75</sup> Paul Willemen, ‘The Edinburgh Film Festival and Joseph H. Lewis’, MSS. 181, Acc. 11303, EIFF Collection, National Library of Scotland, quoted in Lloyd, *Movie Brats*, pp. 19-20

<sup>76</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Notes Towards A Structural Analysis of the Films of Samuel Fuller’, *Cinema* 1:1 (1969); Peter Wollen, ‘Hitchcock’s Vision’. See also Wollen’s contribution to ‘Critics’ Choice’, *Cinema* 1:4 (October, 1969), pp. 4-5

<sup>77</sup> Sam Rohdie, ‘*Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*’, *New Left Review* I/55 (May-June 1969), pp. 66-70; Ben Brewster, ‘Comment’, *New Left Review* I/55, pp. 70-73

<sup>78</sup> A re-founding of the previously existing *Screen Education*. Bolas, *Screen Education*, p. 156

in Film and Television (SEFT), *Screen* was at this time closely informed by the context of film education, like the BFI Education Department. The fact that Rohdie and Brewster would both become editors of *Screen* in the 1970s emblematises the way debates taking place in *New Left Review* in the 1960s would migrate in the following decade, in modified form, to *Screen*.

### ***Structural auteurism***

A defining feature of Wollen's writing of the late 1960s is the abandonment of the methodological frame supplied by Goldmann, which he now saw as problematically 'schematic and historicist',<sup>79</sup> and the substitution instead of structuralism. Convinced by the *politique des auteurs* as a method – in *Signs and Meaning and the Cinema* he describes it as 'indispensable' (*SM*, 62) – but anxious to eliminate aspects he found problematic, namely its corollaries of 'subjective creation' and 'personal expression',<sup>80</sup> Wollen gave the *politique des auteurs* 'a Structuralist makeover' (*SM*, 223), thus beginning to put the *auteur* under erasure.

This 'structural *auteurist*'<sup>81</sup> turn is unsurprising when one considers that in the French intellectual culture that was so influential on Wollen, the approach represented by writers such as Roland Barthes was in the ascendant over a figure like Goldmann.<sup>82</sup> It was through Barthes, then in his structuralist phase, that Wollen

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<sup>79</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Cinema and Semiology: Some Points of Contact', *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), p. 16

<sup>80</sup> Wollen, "'Structuralism implies'", p. 25

<sup>81</sup> This term is employed, for instance, by Geoffrey Nowell Smith, in 'I Was a Star\*Struck Structuralist', *Screen* 14:3 (Autumn 1973), p. 96

<sup>82</sup> Although Goldmann considered his work to be 'genetic structuralism', his isolation from Barthes and others can be seen in documentation of the 1966 conference 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man', in particular the discussions following Lucien Goldmann, 'Structure: Human Reality and Methodological Concept', and Roland Barthes, 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb?', in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (eds.), *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), pp. 111-114 and 147-149

went back to the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and the linguistics of Roman Jakobson, Louis Hjelmslev and Ferdinand de Saussure (*SM*, 223).<sup>83</sup> Wollen had read Barthes's *The Elements of Semiology* when it was published in 1964 in issue 4 of the French journal *Communications*, Barthes's text pushing Wollen towards both structuralism and semiotics.<sup>84</sup> As is well known, the structuralist paradigm in its modern sense began with Saussure. As a later interdisciplinary mode structuralism extends to other fields Saussure's model of language, principally its distinction between synchronic and diachronic (privileging the former) and the notion of structure as giving meaning to the terms within it, which follows from Saussure's claim that the linguistic sign is arbitrary. As François Dosse describes, structuralism is characterised by the taking of linguistics as a 'pilot science' guiding other disciplines 'toward scientificity', in an attempt to systematise the fields of humanistic enquiry.<sup>85</sup> Structuralism was thus perfectly positioned to be picked up by Wollen in a bid to carry out this process with respect to film. Wollen talks of working in a pre-critical area of study that requires transformation into a scientific discipline; his remark that 'an enormous amount of work still remains to be done' (*SM*, 200) echoes Lévi-Strauss's statement that 'the science of myths is still in its infancy'.<sup>86</sup>

Wollen accepts the foundational structuralist assumptions – he writes of Hitchcock that '[t]he first priority is to understand the *structure* of the work, for this is where the meaning lies'.<sup>87</sup> Lévi-Strauss's version of structuralism provides

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<sup>83</sup> See also Wollen, "“Structuralism implies”", pp. 24-25

<sup>84</sup> François Dosse describes *Communications* as 'a major instrument for disseminating structuralist ideas' and this issue in particular as 'a veritable semiological manifesto'. François Dosse, *History of Structuralism. Vol. 1: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 276 and 204

<sup>85</sup> Dosse, *History of Structuralism. Vol. 1*, p. xx

<sup>86</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 3

<sup>87</sup> Wollen, 'Hitchcock's Vision', p. 2. My emphasis

Wollen's closest model. For Lévi-Strauss, the structural paradigm involves looking for a set of unchanging mental structures hidden under apparently heterogeneous materials, specifically myths originating from different cultures at diverse times.<sup>88</sup> The same process defines structural *auteurism*: a filmmaker's work is approached in an attempt 'to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a hard core of basic and often recondite motifs', in a passage from Nowell-Smith that Wollen quotes approvingly.<sup>89</sup> The test case for this method, according to Wollen, is Hawks, since he worked in almost every genre. Despite this, Hawks's films can all be reduced to 'the same thematic preoccupations, the same recurring motifs and incidents, the same visual style and tempo' (*SM*, 65). All Hawks's work is defined by the camaraderie of the all-male group, heroic professionalism and suspicion of women (*SM*, 66-72).

Thus far, it is not clear that this is very different from the *auteurism* of the Lee Russell texts, which also examined a director's body of work as a whole<sup>90</sup> and searched for recurring features from film to film.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, Wollen's structuralist accounts of Fuller, Hitchcock, and 'The Auteur Theory' chapter of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, lift arguments and even whole passages from the Russell articles.<sup>92</sup> The aim of the later texts, however, is not simply the enumeration of common motifs, nor even the identification of an archi-film lying behind multiple cinematic iterations, but the discovery of the 'principle of variation' dictating a director's body of work. This 'esoteric structure', Wollen writes, "seep[s] to the

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<sup>88</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Raw and Cooked*, p. 13: 'if one aspect of a myth seems unintelligible, it can be legitimately dealt with [...] as a transformation of the homologous aspect of another myth, which has been linked with the same group for the sake of argument'

<sup>89</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Luchino Visconti* (London: Secker and Warburg/BFI, 1967), p. 10, quoted in *SM*, 62. Nowell-Smith's book was commissioned by Wollen

<sup>90</sup> Russell, 'Ford', p. 70; Russell, 'Culture and Cinema', p. 113

<sup>91</sup> Lee Russell, 'Howard Hawks', *New Left Review* 1/24 (March-April 1964), p. 82

<sup>92</sup> Compare, for example, Russell, 'Samuel Fuller', p. 87, with Wollen, 'Structural Analysis of the Films of Samuel Fuller', p. 26

surface”, in Lévi-Strauss’s phrase, “through the repetition process” (*SM*, 85). Each of a director’s films is one of a number of possible variants: ‘there will be a kind of torsion within the permutation group, within the matrix, a kind of exploration of certain possibilities, in which some antinomies are foregrounded, discarded or even inverted, whereas others remain stable and constant’ (*SM*, 85). It is exactly this feature of structuralist analysis that Fredric Jameson describes as the ‘*combinatoire*’ (‘combinatory’), a ‘generational mechanism’ by which the structural analyst, ‘having disengaged the basic deep structure’ from a corpus of texts, can ‘generate back up out of it [...] all the other variants of which the model is susceptible as well’.<sup>93</sup> In Ford, for instance, each variation on the Ur-film is generated by the shifting weightings placed on the elements in a series of persistent oppositions: ‘garden versus wilderness, ploughshare versus sabre, settler versus nomad, European versus Indian, civilised versus savage, book versus gun, married versus unmarried, East versus West’ (*SM*, 77-79).

As these last examples indicate, Wollen also translates the researches of the Russell texts into a new idiom, the binary oppositions prevalent in Saussure (signifier and signified, langue and parole, synchronic and diachronic), Jakobson and, especially, Lévi-Strauss (‘the raw and the cooked’; low vs. high, land vs. water in ‘The Story of Asdiwal’; overrating vs. underrating of blood relations in the Oedipus myth).<sup>94</sup> Although in 1964 Wollen had found oppositions in Fuller’s work,

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<sup>93</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 127

<sup>94</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Story of Asdiwal’, *Structural Anthropology, Vol. II*, trans. Monique Layton (London: Allen Lane, 1977), pp. 158-163; Claude Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Structural Study of Myth’, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jakobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York and London: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 214-215. For the regularity of such oppositions as a feature of structuralism see, for instance, Jameson, *Prison-House*, pp. 119-120, and Michael Lane, ‘Introduction’, in Michael Lane (ed.), *Structuralism: A Reader* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 32

now he frames Ford and Hawks in the same manner also.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, in Wollen's structuralist reading of Fuller, which emphasises the roles of characters mediating between two poles such as the 'informer', 'infiltrator' and 'double agent', we can detect Lévi-Strauss's figure of 'the trickster', who 'occupies a position halfway between two polar terms' and 'retain[s] something of that duality – namely an ambiguous and equivocal character'.<sup>96</sup> Wollen's introduction of diagrams in this essay also indicates the influence of structuralism's penchant for information presentation methods associated with the social sciences.<sup>97</sup>

Lévi-Strauss shifted the structural method from language, where the sign is unmotivated, to anthropology, an area where its unmotivated nature is debatable, despite the fact that the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs was a presupposition of Saussure's approach – given that one could not account for a word's meaning in isolation, its sense had to derive from its position in relation to other signs in a system. As Perry Anderson points out, Saussure himself cautioned against the generalisation of his methodology into areas where the sign was motivated, ironically drawing specific attention to those fields with which Lévi-Strauss would begin the structuralist adventure: kinship and economy. (Anderson terms this tendency the '*exorbitation of language*'.)<sup>98</sup> Wollen accepts Lévi-Strauss's displacement, extending the model to films based on a rather thin analogy with myth,<sup>99</sup> as well as adding another: from the social (myth or *langue*) to individual (specific directors). Wollen is well aware of this, affirming that 'up till then

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<sup>95</sup> For Robin Wood's criticisms of this, see 'Hawks De-Wollenized', *Personal Views: Explorations in Film* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1976), pp. 195-206

<sup>96</sup> Lévi-Strauss, 'Structural Study of Myth', p. 226

<sup>97</sup> Wollen, 'Notes Towards a Structural Analysis', p. 27

<sup>98</sup> Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 41-43

<sup>99</sup> Brian Henderson, 'Critique of Cine-Structuralism, Part I', *Film Quarterly* 27:1 (Autumn, 1973), p. 28, and Rohdie, '*Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*', p. 67

structuralism had never been applied to a corpus assigned to an individual, only to “collective” texts like myths and folktales’.<sup>100</sup> Yet for Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, the social element was key to justifying the structuralist approach: since meaning resided in the larger social system rather than the individual enunciation, one had to study the former. Hence for Saussure only *langue*, not *parole*, could be the object of science. My point here is not to claim that since the approach is no longer true to Saussure or Lévi-Strauss’s original intent it must be wrong,<sup>101</sup> but rather that with each displacement the method becomes less appropriate to its object.

Several other problems arise. First, Wollen’s criticism is content-centric, as in the Russell texts. This might appear paradoxical, given structuralism’s formalist predisposition – its accordance of primacy to relationships between elements in a system, over any content such elements have individually. Yet Lévi-Strauss provides a rationale for this thematic focus when he writes that myth exists ‘on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically in “taking off” from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling’, a claim quoted by Wollen.<sup>102</sup> Once more, this has justification in Lévi-Strauss’s case, where the materials under investigation are stories, often passed down orally, whose particular iterations are secondary to a basic recurring narrative. Lévi-Strauss states that myth is at the opposite end of the spectrum from poetry, which cannot be translated.<sup>103</sup> Applying this thematic focus to film, however, means overlooking what film has in common with poetry, ignoring the specific enunciation cinema gives to narratives. Wollen misses what Rohdie

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<sup>100</sup> Wollen, ““Structuralism implies””, p. 25

<sup>101</sup> Nowell-Smith repudiates Charles Eckert for this very argument. See Nowell-Smith, ‘Star\*Struck’, pp. 93 and 97

<sup>102</sup> Lévi-Strauss, ‘Structural Study of Myth’, p. 210, quoted in *SM*, 105

<sup>103</sup> Lévi-Strauss, ‘Structural Study of Myth’, p. 210



refers to as the ““linguistic” elements peculiar to the cinema – composition, lighting, editing, music, staging, camera work, colour, etc.’.<sup>104</sup>

Second, the process of uncovering a ‘hard core of basic and often recondite motifs’ has a reductive, equalising tendency. As Jameson points out, the ‘principle of variation’ of a director’s *oeuvre* (the ‘*combinatoire*’) requires ‘a designation of its essential structural limits or *clôture* [closure, closing]’, ‘the total number of permutations and combinations inherently possible in the model in question’.<sup>105</sup> The method produces a model based on what is common and recurring in a corpus; anomalous aspects are brought under the conceptual framework already established. Moreover, the synchronic emphasis Wollen takes from structuralism enables little sense of a director’s change through time.<sup>106</sup> (It is significant that one of Wood’s texts criticising Wollen’s structural *auteurism* is subtitled ‘the *late* films of John Ford’.)<sup>107</sup> Wollen’s approach contradicts Saussure’s, for whom the synchronic method was meant to ‘freeze’ language at a given moment in order to analyse it as a system at a particular point.<sup>108</sup> Wollen, however, applies it to works from different times, conflating diachronic and synchronic dimensions. Again, Wollen’s method is closer to Lévi-Strauss’s, though in the latter’s case the approach can be defended more convincingly due to the lesser historical specificity of myth.

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<sup>104</sup> Rohdie, ‘Signs and Meaning in the Cinema’, p. 67

<sup>105</sup> Jameson, *Prison-House*, pp. 127-128

<sup>106</sup> See Wollen, ““Structuralism implies””, p. 24. For structuralism’s polemic with history, see Anderson, *Tracks*, pp. 48-51 (where he speaks of structuralism’s ‘*randomization of history*’), and Dosse, *History of Structuralism. Vol. 1*, p. 48

<sup>107</sup> Robin Wood, ‘Shall We Gather at the River? The Late Films of John Ford’, in John Caughie (ed.), *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul/BFI, 1981), pp. 83-101

<sup>108</sup> Jameson, *Prison-House*, p. 6. Saussure states that the synchronic ‘is a relationship between *simultaneous* elements’. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye with the collaboration of Albert Riedlinger, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 90 [129], my emphasis

Third, the relationship between analysis and evaluation is ambiguous. It is difficult to reconcile the ‘Pantheon’ of directors that Wollen includes in the first edition of *Signs and Meaning*, an explicit canon of directorial rankings, with the structural arguments in the main text. In the Pantheon, Ford and Hawks sit in the top row, in contradiction to the critical tenor of Wollen’s remarks on Hawks, particularly regarding Hawks’s representation of women (*SM*, 72).<sup>109</sup> For Brewster, such a criticism is invalid, since he understands *Signs and Meaning* as aimed not at ‘the establishment of standards of excellence in an artistic field’, but as part of ‘a trend of modern criticism’, concerned with ‘the establishment of the semantic field of an art’. On this account, the Pantheon is simply Wollen’s transparent presentation of his own tastes, so that readers may take them into account when reading the book.<sup>110</sup> Brewster’s argument asks us to ignore the fact that Wollen explicitly states his preference for Ford over Hawks and attempts to ground this by pointing to ‘the richness of the shifting relations between antinomies’ in Ford’s work, brought to visibility by structural analysis (*SM*, 83). As contemporary critics noted, Wollen’s structural analysis cannot sustain this claim.<sup>111</sup> Michael Lane remarks that such a divergence between fact and value is a feature of structuralist criticism, exemplified in the work of its most famous figure:

in the Foreword to *Sur Racine* Barthes avers that ‘without doubt Racine is the greatest French writer’, but supports this assertion with arguments that are in no sense structuralist. If criticism can do no more than test for a validity that is defined by a work’s possession of a ‘coherent system of signs’, then the situation could hardly be other. There is no a priori reason to believe that the system of signs in *Superman* is any less coherent than that in *King Lear*.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Wood, ‘Hawks De-Wollenized’, p. 205

<sup>110</sup> Brewster, ‘Comment’, p. 71

<sup>111</sup> Andrew McTaggart, “‘Styleme” “Semanteme” “Plerematic Stratum”: Signs and Meaning in the Cinema’, *Screen*, 10:6 (November, 1969), p. 72; Rohdie, ‘Signs and Meaning in the Cinema’, pp. 67-68

<sup>112</sup> Lane, ‘Introduction’, p. 38

For Barthes and Wollen, structural analysis is applied to works whose interest derives from pre-theoretical infatuations and whims of taste. ‘You study the films in which you are interested’, Wollen admits in 1974.<sup>113</sup> Yet structural analysis cannot convincingly validate the pre-critical canon it is used to explore.

Wollen’s structuralist phase would be short-lived. The high tide of classical structuralism in France had already passed by 1967, before Wollen’s structuralist texts.<sup>114</sup> Beyond the structural frame, it is through a further series of binaries that Wollen attempts to ground the *auteur* theoretically. Andrew Sarris had transplanted the *politique* into English in the 1960s under the name of ‘the auteur theory’,<sup>115</sup> however his elucidation of it was far from constituting a theory, creating the situation in which the term ‘auteur theory’ existed, yet its referent did not.<sup>116</sup> As Brewster notes, Wollen’s chapter on the *auteur* theory in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* attempts to supply this missing theory.<sup>117</sup> To do so, Wollen first distinguishes between *auteur* and *metteur en scène*, a differentiation sometimes made in French film criticism, discriminating between those directors whose films manifest a coherent artistic, moral or social perspective (*auteurs*), and those who anonymously translate scripts into images (*metteurs en scène*).<sup>118</sup> Wollen, attempting to give the terminology of 1950s Parisian cinephilia systematic conceptual content, states that the work of an *auteur* has a ‘semantic dimension’, while that of a *metteur en scène* is purely stylistic (*SM*, 75). This is the same, Wollen argues, as another

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<sup>113</sup> Wollen, “‘Structuralism implies’”, p. 27

<sup>114</sup> Dosse, *History of Structuralism. Vol. 1*, p. xxiv

<sup>115</sup> Andrew Sarris, ‘Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962’, *Film Culture* 27 (Winter, 1962-63)

<sup>116</sup> Andrew Tudor argued at the time that ‘[t]he most misleading development in contemporary English language writings on film lies in the joining of the two terms “auteur” and “theory”’. Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (London: Secker and Warburg/BFI, 1974), p. 121

<sup>117</sup> Ben Brewster, ‘Structuralism in Film Criticism’, *Screen*, 12:1 (Spring 1971), p. 57n1

<sup>118</sup> Jim Hillier, ‘Introduction [to Part Two]’, in Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma, the 1950s*, p. 79

distinction, between composition and performance – the *auteur* composes a new work using a script as ‘a pretext’, the *metteur en scène* performs the work of another (*SM*, 93-95, 62). Composition is coded: ‘[a] coded text consists of discrete units; a performance is continuous, graded rather than coded’ (*SM*, 87). Because it is not coded – it cannot be broken down into a series of units – performance is not available to the scientific investigation that Wollen, utilising the terminology of the Italian Marxist Galvano Della Volpe, calls *de jure* criticism. Instead, it is amenable only to *de facto* criticism, “‘the kingdom of more or less’” (*SM*, 87). Only the *auteur*’s work can be subjected to *de jure* criticism, because only an *auteur* succeeds in exercising the composition function in cinema (*SM*, 86). Thus, the solitary film artist of the apparently romantic *politique des auteurs* has been made necessary to scientific analysis, and cinephilia has been brought under the purview of aesthetic theory.

Yet the terms of Wollen’s binaries constantly deconstruct themselves. Wollen admits that the *auteur/metteur en scène* ‘distinction is not always clear-cut’ (*SM*, 62). As Wood, Wollen’s persistent interlocutor and critic, comments, ‘[i]n concrete cases it is *never* clear-cut, and could not possibly be, any emphasis in *mise-en-scène* implying an attitude, and a set of attitudes implying a thematic structure’.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, Wollen’s distinction between performance and composition is problematised by editing, for instance. Presented by Wollen as on the side of execution (*SM*, 93), editing may quite easily be conceptualised as a kind of composition, producing new meanings through juxtaposition, linking, metaphor, and so on. Meanwhile, the argument that scientific criticism must necessarily be an analytic procedure of decomposition into a series of coded, discrete units is evidence

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<sup>119</sup> Wood, ‘Hawks De-Wollenized’, p. 195

of the dominance of a semiotic model of art and criticism in Wollen's thinking at this time, a perspective developed in other texts by Wollen in this period.

### ***Semiotics and aesthetics***

Wollen's early attempts to develop a semiotic account of cinema are the essay 'Cinema and Semiology: Some Points of Contact'<sup>120</sup> and the third chapter of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, titled 'The Semiology of the Cinema'.<sup>121</sup> Though the two texts make reference to the figures of Barthes, Umberto Eco and Pier Paolo Pasolini, both can be understood as a critique of, and attempt to surpass, the Saussurean perspective on cinema exemplified by the early work of Christian Metz, whom Wollen describes as 'the major pioneer of film semiology'.<sup>122</sup> Wollen read Metz's essay 'The Cinema: Language or Language System?' ('Le cinéma: langue ou langage?') in the same issue of *Communications* that published Barthes's *Elements of Semiology*, but did not agree with some of its arguments.<sup>123</sup> 'The third essay of my book', Wollen notes five years later, 'developed from trying to find an approach which would get round some of the problems I saw in Metz's early writing'.<sup>124</sup>

Metz's 'The Cinema: Language or Language System?' begins by recapitulating the film-as-language metaphor in the classical film theory of

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<sup>120</sup> Presented to a BFI Education Department seminar then published in *Form*, Vol. 7 (March 1968), afterwards published in Wollen (ed.), *Working Papers on the Cinema*, pp. 17-22, and in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Vol. 1. An Anthology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 481-492. My citations refer to the version in *Readings and Writings*, pp. 3-17

<sup>121</sup> See also Wollen, 'The Concept of Communication(s)'; Noam Chomsky, 'Linguistics and Politics' (interview by Robin Blackburn, Gareth Stedman-Jones and Lucien Rey), *New Left Review*, 1/57 (Sep/Oct 1969), pp. 21-34; and Umberto Eco, 'Articulations of the Cinematic Code', *Cinemantics* 1 (January, 1970), pp. 3-9, reprinted in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Vol. 1*, pp. 590-607. Wollen provided critical annotations to the latter

<sup>122</sup> Wollen, "'Structuralism Implies'", p. 25

<sup>123</sup> Wollen, "'Structuralism Implies'", pp. 24-25. Christian Metz, 'Le cinéma: langue ou langage?', *Communications* 4 (1964), pp. 52-90, translated as 'The Cinema: Language or Language System?', *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 31-91

<sup>124</sup> Wollen, "'Structuralism Implies'", p. 25

Vsevolod Pudovkin, Sergei Eisenstein and others, and subjecting it to a stringent critique via modern linguistic concepts. In this essay and others Metz points to numerous differences between film and verbal language. Cinema lacks double articulation, because '[i]t does not have anything corresponding to the phoneme'.<sup>125</sup> Nor can one identify the filmic shot with the word, for a number of reasons: potential shots are infinite, unlike words;<sup>126</sup> they are the creation of the individual filmmaker rather than given by the language;<sup>127</sup> they convey more information than a single word;<sup>128</sup> and they are '*always actualized*', that is to say a shot of a revolver (Metz's example) does not signify 'revolver' but at the minimum '*here is a revolver*'.<sup>129</sup> The shot is closer to the model of a sentence; yet even in this case the equivalence is loose.<sup>130</sup>

Wollen accepts Metz's critique of 'logomorphism' (the argument for cinema's resemblance to language), noting that 'from the early days of film there has been a persistent, though understandable, tendency to exaggerate the importance of analogies with verbal language' (*SM*, 120). Moreover, just as Metz writes that '[t]he film semiologist tends, naturally, to approach his subject with methods derived from linguistics',<sup>131</sup> Wollen argues that modern linguistics allows one to properly ground this critique (*SM*, 97). However, as Wollen points out, Metz's semiology of cinema exemplifies the tendency in semiotics to take verbal language as the model for all sign systems. Semiologists, Wollen argues, 'suffer from two prejudices: firstly in

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<sup>125</sup> Christian Metz, 'Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film', *Film Language*, p. 114. 'Double articulation' refers to how language may be broken down into its 'significant units' or 'monemes' (units of sense), and then further into 'distinctive units' or 'phonemes' (units of sound without meaning of their own). The term comes from André Martinet. See Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 39

<sup>126</sup> Metz, 'Problems of Denotation', p. 115

<sup>127</sup> Metz, 'Problems of Denotation', p. 115

<sup>128</sup> Metz, 'Language or Language System?', pp. 66-67

<sup>129</sup> Metz, 'Language or Language System?', pp. 67

<sup>130</sup> Metz, 'Problems of Denotation', p. 115

<sup>131</sup> Metz, 'Problems of Denotation', p. 108

favour of the arbitrary and the symbolic, secondly in favour of the spoken and the acoustic' (*SM*, 119). These prejudices are traceable to Saussure, in whom one finds an apparent ambivalence regarding language in relation to semiology as a whole.

Saussure, in the passage in which he formulates the notion of semiology (a discipline that 'would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them'), says that '[l]inguistics is only one branch of this general science'.<sup>132</sup> Yet he claims elsewhere in the *Course in General Linguistics* that

signs which are entirely arbitrary convey better than others the ideal semiological process. That is why the most complex and the most widespread of all systems of expression, which is the one we find in human languages, is also the most characteristic of all. In this sense, *linguistics serves as a model for the whole of semiology*, even though languages represent only one type of semiological system.<sup>133</sup>

As Wollen reiterates, '[l]inguistics was to be both a special province of semiology and, at the same time, the master-pattern ("le patron général") for the various other provinces' (*SM*, 98). Both the assertion that arbitrary signs carry out their function better than any other kind of sign and the characterisation of verbal language as composed entirely of arbitrary signs are doubtful. Yet Barthes's reversal of Saussure's initial proposition – 'we must now face the possibility of inverting Saussure's declaration: linguistics is not a part of the general science of signs, even a privileged part, it is semiology which is a part of linguistics'<sup>134</sup> – is characteristic of the linguistic model's dominance.

Metz's method of assessing film against a Saussurean conception of language ends with the almost inevitable conclusion that film does not measure up to the model. Signification, where language resides, is 'conventional', 'divided into

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<sup>132</sup> Saussure, *Course*, pp. 15-16 [33], my emphasis

<sup>133</sup> Saussure, *Course*, p. 68 [100-101], my emphasis

<sup>134</sup> Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, p. 11

discrete units' and derived 'from ideas'. Film is excluded from there and instead assigned to the sphere of 'expression', which is 'natural', 'global and continuous' and 'derived from beings and things'. In it, "“meaning” is somehow immanent to a thing, is directly released from it, and merges with its very form'.<sup>135</sup> Film's images are 'without specific significance: like the joy which spreads across a child's face'.<sup>136</sup> Meaning in film is therefore obtained 'without resorting to a code': cinema is a language without a code (without *langue*), Metz concludes (*SM*, 100).<sup>137</sup> The result of this argument, Wollen notes, is to expel almost all of film from semiological analysis, with the exception of narrative.<sup>138</sup> It is only there, in '*la grande syntagmatique*' ('the large syntagmatic chain' of the image-track), where the eight possible syntagmas identified by Metz (segments of narration such as alternating sequences, episodic sequences and scenes) constitute a certain 'vocabulary' for the filmmaker and may be put to Hjelmslev's commutation test, that true signification can be found in cinema.<sup>139</sup>

As Wollen elucidates, Metz's mutually exclusive, dichotomous account, the fact that he 'perceives only two modes of existence for the sign, natural and cultural' (*SM*, 104), means that his narrow view of film's signifying potential entails an aesthetic that is at once realist and romantic. If cinematic meaning is 'immanent to a thing, is directly released from it, and merges with its very form', then it is entirely logical that Rossellini's oft-cited phrase, '[t]hings are there. Why manipulate them?' becomes a motto for Metz just as it was for Bazin, the most famous defender of a

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<sup>135</sup> Metz, 'Language or Language System?', p. 78. Metz softened this dualistic conception – see the later footnote added to this passage

<sup>136</sup> Metz, 'Language or Language System?', p. 37

<sup>137</sup> Metz, 'Language or Language System?', p. 79

<sup>138</sup> Wollen, 'Cinema and Semiology', p. 12

<sup>139</sup> Metz, 'Problems of Denotation', pp. 119-133, 145-146. See also Christian Metz, 'Current Problems of Film Theory: on Jean Mitry's *L'Esthétique et Psychologie du Cinéma, Vol. II*', *Screen* 14:1-2 (Spring-Summer, 1973), p. 77



realist cinematic aesthetic (*SM*, 114). Cinema may record and transmit the meaning pre-existing in the world, but – aside from *la grande syntagmatique* – does not constitute a system in itself for the production of signification, transforming what it records and making new meanings. Hence Metz’s attack on Eisenstein’s ‘taste for manipulation’.<sup>140</sup> Metz’s realist film aesthetics here represents one of two possible choices given his conception of cinema, the other manifested by Barthes, who simply rejects cinema *tout court* because its inability to ever reach the status of a fully-coded art of signification blocks its attainment of the modernity possible in literature.<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, if the film image is defined by a natural expressiveness and wholeness, then Metz’s aesthetic must be an organicist, anti-intellectual romanticism; conceptual thought, with its ideas and its meanings established by convention, its desire to break down and categorise, is on the side of signification (*SM*, 120).<sup>142</sup> Thus Metz disparagingly compares montage-focused cinema to ‘an artificial limb’ and ‘powdered milk and instant coffee’.<sup>143</sup>

Thus, while Wollen agrees with Metz on the historic overstatement of the parallels between film and verbal language, he neither accepts the Saussurean model of semiotics as applied to film nor the aesthetic axioms flowing from it. Wollen writes that ‘my sympathies on the question of logomorphism lie with Metz, but my sympathies on the question of aesthetics lie with Eisenstein’.<sup>144</sup> In a sense, Wollen’s semiotics and aesthetics will try to mediate between Metz and Eisenstein. Although treated critically, Eisenstein provides a model that is anti-realist and intent on

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<sup>140</sup> Metz, ‘Language or Language System?’, p. 37

<sup>141</sup> Barthes, ‘To Write: An Intransitive Verb?’, p. 154

<sup>142</sup> See also Wollen, ‘Cinema and Semiology’, pp. 4-5. As Roger Odin notes, Metz later came to recognise the mistake of overemphasising this distinction between the ‘analogical’ and the ‘coded’. Roger Odin, ‘Notes sur la sémiologie du cinéma en Angleterre’, *Regards sur la littérature et la civilisation civilisation contemporaines* (Saint Etienne: Centre Interdisciplinaire d’Etude et de Recherche sur l’Expression Contemporaine, 1974), p. 186

<sup>143</sup> Metz, ‘Language or Language System?’, p. 35

<sup>144</sup> Wollen, ‘Cinema and Semiology’, p. 17

developing film into a conceptual discourse. Semiotics will act as the foundation for this cinema; however, it is not Saussure but the American philosopher C. S. Peirce who will provide the necessary theory.

What Wollen takes from Peirce is what the latter, in his ‘Speculative Grammar’, calls ‘A Second Trichotomy of Signs’, according to which ‘a Sign may be termed an *Icon*, an *Index*, or a *Symbol*’.<sup>145</sup> An icon is a sign ‘partaking in the characters of the object’<sup>146</sup> – the sign is *like* the object it represents, in appearance or structure. An icon, Wollen summarises, ‘represents its object mainly by its similarity to it’ (*SM*, 102). An index, meanwhile, is ‘really and in its individual existence connected with the individual object’.<sup>147</sup> That is, ‘an existential bond’ connects the sign and the object represented, as a footprint is a sign of the person that made it or a weathercock is a sign of the direction of the wind (*SM*, 102). A symbol is ‘a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas’.<sup>148</sup> It signifies by convention, ‘in consequence of a habit’,<sup>149</sup> and thus, Wollen argues, ‘corresponds to Saussure’s arbitrary sign’ (*SM*, 102-103).

As D. N. Rodowick notes, this was only one of a number of sign trichotomies forwarded by Peirce.<sup>150</sup> However, Peirce stated that the Icon/Index/Symbol taxonomy was ‘[t]he most fundamental’<sup>151</sup> and the one he used

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<sup>145</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, ‘Speculative Grammar’, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume II: Elements of Logic*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), p. 143 [247]

<sup>146</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, ‘Existential Graphs’, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume III: Exact Logic (Published Papers) and Volume IV: The Simplest Mathematics*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 414 [531]

<sup>147</sup> Peirce, ‘Existential Graphs’, p. 414 [531]

<sup>148</sup> Peirce, ‘Speculative Grammar’, p. 143 [249]

<sup>149</sup> Peirce, ‘Existential Graphs’, p. 414 [531]

<sup>150</sup> D. N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 177-178n15

<sup>151</sup> Peirce, ‘Speculative Grammar’, p. 157 [275]

most often.<sup>152</sup> As Wollen remarks, it is ‘elegant and exhaustive’ (*SM*, 103); it overcomes the binary of natural and conventional signs that Saussure and Metz’s semiology was based on; it is triadic and makes no claim that its categories are mutually exclusive – signs may contain varying degrees of each category within themselves (a photograph is indexical and iconic, a diagram is primarily iconic but often contains symbolic features, and so on); it includes the Saussurean classification within it, in the category of symbols, but does not make this the ideal sign according to which others must be judged. As Jakobson reflects, ‘Peirce’s semiotic edifice encloses the whole multiplicity of significative phenomena’, from ‘a knock at the door’ to ‘an algebraic equation’.<sup>153</sup>

It is through Jakobson that Wollen reads Peirce (*SM*, 102 and 104).<sup>154</sup> Jakobson had applied Peirce’s model to verbal language, arguing that Saussure’s conception of it as an organisation of arbitrary signs – that is, as what Peirce calls symbols – elides its iconic and indexical dimensions. To pick one of Jakobson’s many examples, the order of words and phrases may *resemble* their content in iconic manner, as ‘veni, vidi, vici’ echoes in its order the temporal sequence of the deeds it describes.<sup>155</sup> Meanwhile, linguistic indexes can be found in those words that Jakobson labels ‘shifters’: a pronoun such as “I”, given that it designates the speaker of the word “I”, is in an existential and therefore indexical relation with the object represented.<sup>156</sup> Jakobson suggests, as well, that ‘[t]he signs of a given art can carry

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<sup>152</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, ‘To Lady Welby’, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume VIII: Reviews, Correspondence, and Bibliography*, ed. Arthur W. Burks, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 241 [368]

<sup>153</sup> Roman Jakobson, ‘A Glance at the Development of Semiotics’, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 442

<sup>154</sup> Barthes also discussed Peirce in *Elements of Semiology*, pp. 36-38

<sup>155</sup> Roman Jakobson, ‘Quest for the Essence of Language’, *Language in Literature*, p. 418

<sup>156</sup> Roman Jakobson, ‘Shifters and Verbal Categories’, *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 388

the imprint of each of the three semiotic modes described by Peirce'.<sup>157</sup> Modelling his approach on Jakobson's, in 'The Semiology of Cinema' Wollen tries to show that cinema is a system consisting of these three sign types.<sup>158</sup>

Wollen begins from the photographic image that forms the elementary cell of most films. In a passage quoted by Wollen, Peirce writes that photographs are

in certain respects [...] exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photos having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection. (*SM*, 103)<sup>159</sup>

Photographs are both iconic and indexical, but since their iconicity is a product of their indexicality, the latter is paramount. As Wollen notes, Bazin founded his realist aesthetic on this quality of the cinematic image (*SM*, 105).<sup>160</sup>

While Wollen admits that indexicality has primacy in film, elsewhere he seeks to draw attention to the appearance of Peirce's other signs, characterising Josef von Sternberg's work, for instance, as a species of iconic cinema. Sternberg 'sought, as far as possible, to disown and destroy the existential bond between the natural world and the film image'. Sternberg compared his practice to painting – an iconic rather than indexical medium (*SM*, 117). By trying to erase the image's correspondence with nature – 'Sternberg created a completely artificial realm, from which nature was rigorously excluded' – Sternberg sought a cinema that emphasised iconicity while minimising indexicality: '[i]t was the iconic aspect of the sign which Sternberg stressed, detached from the indexical in order to conjure up a world,

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<sup>157</sup> Jakobson, 'Glance', p. 451

<sup>158</sup> Peter Wollen, untitled document (inaugural Northwestern lecture notes), 'Film Theory 2 (ancient)', Item 100, Box B, Peter Wollen archive, BFI Special Collections, London, p. 5

<sup>159</sup> Peirce, 'Speculative Grammar', p. 159 [281], quoted in *SM*, 103

<sup>160</sup> André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 9-16

comprehensible by virtue of resemblances to the natural world, yet other than it, a kind of dream world' (*SM*, 118).

Though suggestive as an optic through which to view Sternberg's *oeuvre*, Wollen's position is open to a fundamental objection, which is that film is indexical, in Peirce's sense, regardless of whether it represents 'the natural world' or is shot entirely in the studio. Rossellini, who – given his talismanic status for Bazin – figures in Wollen's argument as a director of an opposing tendency, is strictly speaking no more indexical than Sternberg, even if the former is 'patient, waiting humbly' and the latter 'autocratic' (*SM*, 118), dissatisfied with the reproductive nature of the camera (*SM*, 117), seeking to mask reality behind 'nets, veils, fronds, creepers, lattices, streamers, gauze' (*SM*, 118). Sternberg's films are simply indexes of these nets, veils, and other materials, instead of the natural world. Metz, in fact, had pointed this out:

The spectacle recorded by the film-maker may be natural ("realistic" films, scenes shot in the street, *cinéma vérité*, etc.) or arranged (the film-operas of Eisenstein's last period, Orson Welles's films, and, in general, the cinema of the unreal, or of the fantastic, expressionist cinema, etc.). But it is basically all one thing. The *subject* of the film is either "realistic" or not; but, whatever the case, the film itself only shows whatever it shows.<sup>161</sup>

Despite his attacks on Bazin, Wollen makes the same slippage from photographic indexicality to realism. His postulated connection between iconicity and an artificial filmic dream-world is the other side of this. However, the identification posited between the primarily indexical nature of the filmic sign and a realist aesthetic is unjustified – a film by Rossellini or a documentary is no more indexical than the most imaginative fiction film.

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<sup>161</sup> Metz, 'Language or Language System?', p. 76

Wollen also seeks to rehabilitate the symbolic sign in film. This is necessary in order to ground scientific criticism. ‘It is particularly important to admit the presence of the symbolic – hence conceptual – dimension of the cinema because this is a necessary guarantee of objective criticism’ (*SM*, 130). We are brought back to the distinction made by Della Volpe that Wollen takes up in chapter two of *Signs and Meaning*: the symbolic – because it is coded, discrete, and so forth – is needed in order to approach a *de jure*, rather than *de facto*, criticism (*SM*, 131). Moreover, Wollen seeks to combat the erasure of the symbolic dimension of film by realist aesthetics. While early film theory and practice, exemplified by Eisenstein and Pudovkin, over-emphasised the symbolic aspect of cinema, the preponderance of the realist tendency represented by Metz and Bazin led to a swing in the opposite direction (*SM*, 126). Metz minimises the importance of cinematic iconography, noting that although the classical Western’s coded good and bad characters in terms of white and black outfits, the ‘poverty’ of this code ensured it was short-lived and that the ‘great directors’ shunned it (*SM*, 124).<sup>162</sup> In contrast, Wollen argues that a significant place remains for iconography in genre movies.<sup>163</sup> Moreover, Wollen proposes a number of apparently symbolic elements across prominent examples of classical Hollywood cinema:

[t]he symbolic structure of the ascent and fall in *Lola Montès* or *La Ronde*? Welles? The shark, the wheelchair, the hall of mirrors in *Lady from Shanghai*? [Luis] Buñuel? *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*? The extraordinary symbolic scenes in the films of Douglas Sirk, *Imitation of Life* or *Written on the Wind*? (*SM*, 127)

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<sup>162</sup> Metz, ‘Language or Language System?’, p. 70

<sup>163</sup> Wollen, ‘Cinema and Semiology’, p. 11

However, as Roger Odin observes, Wollen slides here from Peirce's symbol (an unmotivated sign, designating by convention) to symbol in its non-technical sense.<sup>164</sup> The ascent and fall in the circus in *Lola Montès* (Max Ophüls, 1955), for instance, is hardly an *unmotivated* sign of Montès's rise and fall in the outside world. Even if one is careful to remain with Peirce's definition, the symbolic in film, as Wollen admits, 'is limited and secondary' (*SM*, 120). Whereas indexicality is a characteristic of the shot, symbols operate in the pro-filmic event, occurring *within* the shot at an ontologically secondary level, a fact Metz later indicates when he speaks of the prevalence of 'filmed symbols' but not 'filmic symbols'.<sup>165</sup>

Although critical of Eisenstein's logomorphism, the attention Wollen pays here to the symbolic illustrates the importance of his excavation of the Soviet filmmaker elsewhere in *Signs and Meaning*. Eisenstein, according to Wollen, 'was the first, and probably still the most important, major theorist of cinema' (*SM*, 4),<sup>166</sup> one of the few writers who recognised 'the cataclysmic reassessment of aesthetics which must take place' in the face of the challenges to traditional conceptions of art presented by film and modernism (*SM*, 1, 57).<sup>167</sup> Wollen's 'return to Eisenstein' here parallels *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's 1969 *Cahiers* editorial 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' states that 'the only possible line of advance seems to be to use the theoretical writing of the Russian film-makers of the twenties (Eisenstein above all) to elaborate and apply a critical theory of the cinema';<sup>168</sup> the magazine went on to publish a series of translations and a 1971 special issue on

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<sup>164</sup> Odin, 'Notes sur la sémiologie', p. 189

<sup>165</sup> Metz, 'Current Problems of Film Theory', p. 74

<sup>166</sup> See also Guilbaut and Watson 'From an Interview with Peter Wollen'

<sup>167</sup> See also Wollen, 'Cinema and Semiology', p. 3. Wollen's interest in Eisenstein was already manifest in Russell, 'Culture and Cinema', p. 114

<sup>168</sup> Jean-Louis [erroneously credited as 'Jean-Luc'] Comolli and Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', trans. Susan Bennett, *Screen* 12:1 (Spring, 1971), originally 'Cinéma/idéologie/critique', *Cahiers du cinéma* 216 (October, 1969)

Eisenstein.<sup>169</sup> Contemporary directors had made a similar turn, particularly Godard, whose ‘defence of Eisenstein [...] reinforced [Wollen’s] view that Eisenstein was not simply a great filmmaker but also a great artist in the fullest sense of the word’.<sup>170</sup>

According to Wollen, after the publication of Barthes’s *Elements of Semiology*, ‘Eisenstein suddenly appeared in a new light – as a pioneer theorist of semiotics’.<sup>171</sup> As Wollen points out, Eisenstein speaks of himself as ‘a young engineer’ operating under the assumption that ‘in every scientific investigation there must be a unit of measurement’. He excitedly refers to seeking ‘the unit of impression produced by art! Science knows “ions”, “electrons” and “neutrons”. Let there be “attraction” in art’ (*SM*, 21).<sup>172</sup> One can see that in this description of his ‘montage of attractions’ Eisenstein is proposing a coded art of discrete units, manifesting the impulse to decompose, examine and recombine later found in semiotics. As Wollen illustrates, the criticisms directed at Eisenstein in the Stalinist era, for instance Ivan Anisimov’s assertion that Eisenstein ‘takes the village outside of its real relations, outside of its living connections’ and that ‘[h]e disintegrates reality into disconnected, unrelated pieces’, presage the substance of Metz’s criticisms described above (*SM*, 43). For Wollen, this draws attention to the conservatism inherent in realism: ‘[u]ndeformed, undisintegrated, merely suggestive versions of ‘reality’ are always the best propaganda for the *status quo*’ (*SM*, 44). Realism’s relationship to reality is not dynamic; it cannot propose alternatives or enter into an analytical, critical relationship with the world, but

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<sup>169</sup> David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), p. 263

<sup>170</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Perhaps...’, *October* 88 (Spring, 1999), p. 44

<sup>171</sup> Wollen, ‘Perhaps...’, p. 44. See also Bordwell, *Cinema of Eisenstein*, p. 261, and Wollen’s comments in Guilbaut and Watson, ‘From an Interview with Peter Wollen’ that Eisenstein ‘also raised questions about film language, and these questions were on people’s minds at the time’

<sup>172</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Notes of a Film Director* (Amsterdam: Fredonia, 2003), p. 16



merely reflects it. One can see how Wollen is developing here the anti-realism that would become a credo of 1970s British film theory.<sup>173</sup>

More speculatively, I would argue for the importance to Wollen of Eisenstein's notion of 'intellectual montage'. This, according to Eisenstein, is a form allowing for the 'cinematic *materialisation of ideas*', attempting 'the direct translation of an ideological thesis into a chain of visual stimulants'.<sup>174</sup> Elsewhere, he states that it is 'the formal possibility of a kind of filmic reasoning. While the conventional film directs the *emotions*, this suggests an opportunity to encourage and direct the whole *thought process*, as well'.<sup>175</sup> 'Cinema is ready to begin operating through the abstract word that leads to a concrete concept'.<sup>176</sup> The non-diegetic 'metaphor'<sup>177</sup> of the slaughtered bull in *Strike* was an early experiment in this direction; the most advanced expressions of this form of montage, though, are in *October* (1927), for instance the famous 'Gods sequence' presenting a series of images of religious figures, shifting 'downward' from Orthodox Christian icons to the 'fetishes' of non-European religions, which Eisenstein describes by stating that '[w]e retain the description "God" and show idols that in no way correspond with our own image of this concept. From this we are to draw anti-religious conclusions as to what the divine as such really is [...] there is here an attempt to draw a purely

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<sup>173</sup> See also Wollen, 'Cinema and Semiology', p. 10. For examples of this critique of realism, see *Screen* 13:1 (Spring, 1972), a special issue on realism; Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', pp. 7-27, and Stephen Heath, 'Lessons from Brecht', pp. 103-128, both in *Screen* 15:2 (Summer, 1974)

<sup>174</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, 'The GTK Teaching and Research Workshop (A Conversation with the Leader of the Workshop, S. M. Eisenstein)', *Selected Works, Vol. I: Writings, 1922-1934*, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (London, Bloomington and Indianapolis: BFI Publishing and Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 129

<sup>175</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Dramaturgy of Film Form', *Selected Works Vol. I*, p. 180

<sup>176</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, 'Our *October*. Beyond the Played and the Non-Played', *Selected Works, Vol. I*, p. 104

<sup>177</sup> The impossibility of true metaphor and simile in film is shown by Metz in 'Current Problems of Film Theory', pp. 70-72

intellectual conclusion'.<sup>178</sup> Intellectual cinema would have received its fullest realisation in Eisenstein's film of *Capital*; as his notes show, he envisaged it as '[a] film treatise'.<sup>179</sup> Eisenstein's attempted or envisioned 'theoretical' films parallel Mulvey and Wollen's 'theory films', a comparison I draw out in my next chapter.<sup>180</sup>

Wollen is disappointed that Eisenstein did not develop his investigations further, 'disown[ing] his early experiments with non-diegetic metaphor' even though 'as Godard has shown in *Une Femme mariée* and *La Chinoise*, this was not a dead-end street at all' (*SM*, 56). Eisenstein was also guilty of 'underestimat[ing] the assistance verbal discourse can and must give on the soundtrack' (*SM*, 56-57). According to Wollen, Eisenstein's retreat from ideas, from rationality (the subject of an unfavourable comparison with Brecht, though one that is not unsympathetic to the additional problems Eisenstein encountered), was determined not just by extrinsic factors but by his 'whole orientation', his continual 'emphasis on the emotional impact of the cinema [which] tended all the time to draw him away from the symbolic' (*SM*, 56-57). Unlike Brecht (and unlike, as we shall see, Mulvey and Wollen), Eisenstein's was led more and more towards the synchronisation rather than separation of the senses, towards the *Gesamkunstwerk* ('total artwork') (*SM*, 42). His overall trajectory represents, for Wollen, a retreat through the artistic innovations of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: 'the long voyage from *Strike* to *Ivan the Terrible* was a voyage back through the modern movement,

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<sup>178</sup> Eisenstein, 'Dramaturgy of Film Form', p. 180

<sup>179</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, 'Notes for a Film of *Capital*', trans. Maciej Sliwowski, Jay Leyda and Annette Michelson, *October* 2 (Summer, 1976), p. 4

<sup>180</sup> Bordwell refers to *October* as a 'theoretical' film, 'exploring different conceptions of the sign and identifying those conceptions with particular historical forces'. *Cinema of Eisenstein*, p. 93

from Constructivism to Symbolism, from the factory siren and steam whistle to the colour organ and dramatic mystery'.<sup>181</sup>

Nevertheless, Eisenstein's early work connects fields that would become inextricably interlinked for Wollen in the 1970s: semiotics, politics and modernism. Wollen draws attention to Eisenstein's time as a poster artist on the agit-trains in the 1921 civil war and to the fact that Eisenstein's actors in the Proletkult were trained in the history of the class struggle (*SM*, 25 and 19). Eisenstein attempted to address the problem that 'Marxism had no satisfactory aesthetics' (*SM*, 35) emphasising form as well as subject matter. *Strike*, for example, was 'the first instance of revolutionary art where the form has turned out to be more revolutionary than the content', in the filmmaker's words.<sup>182</sup> Similarly, because Eisenstein was 'intimately connected with avant-garde movements in the other arts',<sup>183</sup> he allows Wollen to situate cinema in the context of modernism as a whole. This draws attention to film's plurality, making an implied case for a cinematic ontology that is diverse, multifaceted, 'an art which combines and incorporates others, which operates on different sensory bands, different channels, using different codes and modes of expression' (*SM*, 1-3), 'located (ontologically) at the crossroads of literature, music, theater and painting'.<sup>184</sup>

We can return here to Peirce. As already suggested, the Peircean trichotomy allows Wollen to re-conceptualise aesthetic debates. Previous aesthetics of cinema latched onto one semiological component of cinema and established themselves on it, to the detriment of the others (*SM*, 104). This is true of Eisenstein, Metz and

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<sup>181</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Eisenstein: Cinema and the Avant-Garde', *Art International* 12:9 (November, 1968), p. 28

<sup>182</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form', *Selected Works, Vol. I*, p. 59

<sup>183</sup> Wollen, 'Eisenstein: Cinema and the Avant-Garde', p. 23

<sup>184</sup> Wollen, 'Perhaps...', p. 42

Bazin, for all the latter's remarks that cinema is a mixed art.<sup>185</sup> In contrast, Wollen insists on the semiotically heterogeneous nature of cinema:

The cinematic sign, the language or semiotic of cinema, like the verbal language, comprises not only the indexical and the iconic, but also the symbolic. [...] It is quite misleading to validate one dimension of the cinema unilaterally at the expense of all the others. There is no pure cinema, grounded on a single essence, hermetically sealed from contamination. (*SM*, 132)

The privileged aesthetic that emerges on this model is one that makes use of all three dimension of the cinematic sign,<sup>186</sup> exemplified pre-eminently by Godard. In Godard's work, 'as in Peirce's perfect sign, the cinema has become an almost equal amalgam of the symbolic, the iconic and the indexical. His films have conceptual meaning, pictorial beauty and documentary truth' (*SM*, 132). The different threads laid out in *Signs and Meaning* therefore come together in Godard – semiotics, modernist filmmaking of the past, a heterogeneous aesthetic of cinema, even classical Hollywood given Godard's cinephilic streak. Godard provides a model for contemporary cinematic practices; he will be a constant reference point for Mulvey and Wollen's writings and films. These films, however, draw as much on Mulvey's writings as Wollen's. In order to fully stake out the ground for examining these films (as well as the lines of influence and dialogue between Mulvey and Wollen's writings), I turn now to Mulvey's texts of the early 1970s.

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<sup>185</sup> André Bazin, 'In Defense of Mixed Cinema', *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, pp. 53-75

<sup>186</sup> Rohdie, 'Signs and Meaning in the Cinema', p. 70

## Mulvey Before ‘Visual Pleasure’

Mulvey’s writing begins much more tentatively than Wollen’s. Three years younger, she took a comparatively long time after graduating from Oxford before publishing. Wollen finished in 1960 and wrote his first article for *New Left Review* in 1963, while Mulvey left university in 1963, her first, short text appearing in 1970, the year after *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. Between 1970 and 1974 – the period preceding the publication of ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ – Mulvey published eight texts, either on her own or as a co-author, and co-edited a book; in contrast, between 1963 and 1967 Wollen published nearly thirty essays and review articles, as well as editing the ‘Motifs’ section of *New Left Review* and co-editing *Samuel Fuller*. It is plausible to infer the gendered determinants of this smaller output, both in terms of the difficulty of accessing the same New Left publication outlets and film cultural institutions open to men like Wollen,<sup>187</sup> and the inhibition towards writing that Mulvey has spoken of having at this time. Surveying her work in the 1989 introduction to her first essay collection, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Mulvey describes ‘a long and painful struggle with writing’, an ‘enormous resistance that at times almost amounted to phobia’. Its gradual overcoming was thanks to the women’s movement, which ‘made it possible [...] to begin to be able to write’. The women’s movement created a place from which Mulvey could speak, made writing an urgent imperative and democratised the production of ideas:

Suddenly a perspective on the world had unfolded that gave women a position to speak from, and things that had to be said not from choice but

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<sup>187</sup> Juliet Mitchell has recounted an anecdote regarding the attitude to women on the *New Left Review* board in the 1960s: ‘I remember being at a meeting in the mid-1960s with twelve men where the Third World was divided up and the men were going to study Third World countries; I said, “I’ll study women” and everybody said “no”, that was not a political subject’. Juliet Mitchell, ‘Feminism and Psychoanalysis at the Millennium’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 10:2 (1999), p. 188. Note as well, for instance, the lack of female speakers at the BFI Education Department seminar series and women writers in the BFI Cinema One books commissioned by Wollen

from political necessity. And the politics of the personal insisted that material was there for anyone to draw on, allotted by history and ideology, by oppression and exploitation, not subject to specialisation, expertise or education.<sup>188</sup>

In Mulvey's words, her early articles are 'like stepping-stones, spontaneous and tentative, generated purely and simply by the energy of the Women's Movement'.<sup>189</sup> As Mandy Merck notes, however, some timidity persists even in the 1989 introduction quoted above, 'with its three hesitant infinitives, *to begin / to be able / to write*'.<sup>190</sup>

As with Wollen's Russell essays, I will situate these pre-'Visual Pleasure' writings and sketch tropes that reappear in Mulvey's later work. Half of these early texts appear in women's movement publications (*Shrew* and *Spare Rib*), while others were published in the socialist weekly *7 Days* or associated with the Edinburgh Film Festival. Rather than exhibiting the focus on cinema that defines Mulvey's writing from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, they cross the fields of film, contemporary art and activism, illustrating Amy Tobin's argument that the women's movement provided a network through which feminists could trespass disciplinary boundaries within cultural production, and between art and political organisation.<sup>191</sup> Half of them are co-authored, suggesting a way of surmounting the struggle with writing as well as the political and theoretical importance of collectivity and collaboration.

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<sup>188</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Introduction to the First Edition', *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. xxviii

<sup>189</sup> Mulvey, 'Introduction to the First Edition', p. xxvii

<sup>190</sup> Mandy Merck, 'Mulvey's Manifesto', *Camera Obscura* 66 (September, 2007), p. 2. Merck gives additional context for Mulvey in the period before 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'

<sup>191</sup> Amy Tobin, 'Moving Pictures: Intersections Between Art, Film and Feminism in the 1970s', *Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ)* 4:1-2 (December, 2015), pp. 128-129

‘Miss World’, Mulvey’s first essay, was published in *Shrew*, the magazine of the London Women’s Liberation Workshop, in 1970.<sup>192</sup> The workshop was a network of women’s groups across London, with a different group editing each issue of *Shrew*. The issue in which ‘Miss World’ appears was put together by the History Group, whose list of attendees reads like a register of UK-based feminist intellectuals of a particular generation; as well as Mulvey, it included Sally Alexander, Anna Davin, Rosalind Delmar, Mary Kelly, Branka Magas, Juliet Mitchell and Margaret Walters.<sup>193</sup> The History Group was a feminist study group exemplifying the women’s movement practice of small group organisation. Davin notes that despite its name, the members read more psychoanalysis than history.<sup>194</sup> According to Delmar, Mitchell’s ‘Why Freud?’ essay, published in the same issue of *Shrew* as ‘Miss World’, brought to light serious division in the History group regarding the value of psychoanalysis for feminism.<sup>195</sup> Mulvey remembers critical reading in the group of Engels, Lévi-Strauss and Freud, ‘great works by great men that were relevant to understanding the oppression of women but in which we could also find blind spots, symptomatic of misunderstanding’.<sup>196</sup> The History Group was a space in which the foundations for later works by its members were collectively

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<sup>192</sup> Anonymous [Margarita Jimenez and Laura Mulvey], ‘Miss World’, *Shrew* (December 1970), pp. 16-18. Reprinted as ‘The Spectacle is Vulnerable: Miss World, 1970’, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 3-5, from which I cite

<sup>193</sup> Mulvey was part of the group from around 1970 to autumn 1972, when she left for the USA with Wollen, who had a two-year position at Northwestern University. My information on the History Group draws on my interview with Laura Mulvey, 4 August 2014; an interview with Rosalind Delmar by Rachel Cohen, conducted on various dates in 2010, part of *Sisterhood and After: The Women’s Liberation Oral History Project*, a set of recordings available at the British Library, London; Anna Davin’s chapter in Micheline Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London: Virago, 1990), p. 61; Mignon Nixon, “‘Why Freud?’” asked the *Shrew: Psychoanalysis and Feminism, Post-Partum Document*, and the History Group’, *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* 20:2 (June, 2015), pp. 2-3

<sup>194</sup> Anna Davin in *Once a Feminist*, p. 61. The group later changed its name to the Family Study group

<sup>195</sup> Rosalind Delmar interviewed by Rachel Cohen, track 4 (17 September 2010), *Sisterhood and After: The Women’s Liberation Oral History Project*, British Library, London

<sup>196</sup> Mulvey, ‘Introduction to the Second Edition’, p. xv.

laid: Mitchell speaks of her 1974 book *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* and Kelly's artwork *Post-Partum Document* as 'born from all our bodies' in the group, and the same may be said of Mulvey's writings and films of the mid- to late-1970s.<sup>197</sup> As with Mitchell's reading of Freud, Mulvey will make the Oedipus complex central to her deployment of psychoanalysis in her work of the next decade.<sup>198</sup>

'Miss World' is a firsthand account of a specific political intervention, the disruption of the November 1970 Miss World pageant in London by members of the women's movement.<sup>199</sup> Mulvey and Margarita Jimenez wrote sections separately, bringing them together to produce a 'textual interweaving'.<sup>200</sup> The text was discussed and edited by the History group as a whole,<sup>201</sup> and this collectivity is also marked by the group subject implied in the repeated use of 'we', an example of the 'rhetoric of early feminist solidarity'.<sup>202</sup> The text was published anonymously, and Mulvey recalls debate within the group as to whether articles should be signed;<sup>203</sup> although she was strongly in favour of anonymity, most of the other articles in the History group *Shrew* carry signatures. In eschewing the traditional author, an individual with ownership over the text, anonymity and collectivity – frequent features of women's movement writing – were crucial in enabling Mulvey to write.<sup>204</sup> Such strategies, as well as recalling Wollen's negotiation of similar issues in his earlier pseudonymity, presage the collaborative nature of their later filmmaking and their rejection of personal cinema in favour of theoretical discourse

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<sup>197</sup> Juliet Mitchell, 'Theory as an Object', *October* 113 (Summer, 2005), p. 36, quoted in Nixon, "Why Freud?", p. 4

<sup>198</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Allen Lane, 1974)

<sup>199</sup> For an account of this political action, see Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 15-16

<sup>200</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014

<sup>201</sup> Jimenez and Mulvey, 'The Spectacle is Vulnerable', p. 3

<sup>202</sup> Mulvey, 'Introduction to the Second Edition', p. ix.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014

<sup>204</sup> Mulvey, 'Introduction to the First Edition', p. xxviii



in their works. The republication of 'Miss World' in *Visual and Other Pleasures* in 1989, under Mulvey and Jimenez's names, indicates that Mulvey had by this point become comfortable with the weight of responsibility conferred by signing her name. More critically we might remark that it is also symptomatic of an attenuation of collectivity between 1970 and 1989; the text could no longer be presented as produced by the History group as a whole, even if the repeated 'we' remained.

The essay's central motif of objectification is familiar to any reader of 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. The situation of the Miss World contestants 'is the condition of all women', in which 'girls [...] parade, silent and smiling, to be judged on the merits of their figures and faces'.<sup>205</sup> As Mulvey herself remarked, at the root of this was a major concern of the Women's Movement: women's bodies as the site of political struggle, an issue which was seen to exceed 'the frontiers of the physical' and enter 'the realm of representation' in which her later work would situate itself.<sup>206</sup> Recognisable as well is Mulvey's entreaty to interrupt the conventional architecture of spectacle with its passive spectatorship, an appeal that will inform her later conception of counter-cinema.<sup>207</sup>

Shortly afterwards, Mulvey published a short review of *A Clockwork Orange* in *7 Days*.<sup>208</sup> *7 Days* shared editorial board members and contributors with *New Left Review*, but was more sympathetic to the women's movement,<sup>209</sup> with articles on the

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<sup>205</sup> Jimenez and Mulvey, 'The Spectacle is Vulnerable', p. 3

<sup>206</sup> Mulvey, 'Introduction to the First Edition', p. xxxiii. For other affirmations of the centrality of questions of representation and imaging to the women's movement, see Barbara Caine, *English Feminism: 1780-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 255; Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, p. 204; and Griselda Pollock, 'The Politics of Theory', in Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 6

<sup>207</sup> Jimenez and Mulvey, 'The Spectacle is Vulnerable', p. 5

<sup>208</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Death Gets a Kiss from Kubrick', *7 Days* 12 (19 January 1972), p. 21

<sup>209</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014. For *7 Days* in relation to feminism, see the contributions by Maxine Molyneux and Rosalind Delmar in Mary Kelly *et al*, 'On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Period of Time', available as a .pdf at <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/50401>, pp. 11 and 22

Miss World pageant and contributions by Rosalind Delmar, for instance.<sup>210</sup> Wollen was a ‘non staff editor’ and contributor. That Mulvey published here underlines how socialism is the second frame through which we should see her work, going back to her ‘first, teenage, political memories’ which are of what Stuart Hall has termed ‘the first New Left’: the Suez crisis, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament’s Aldermaston marches and demonstrations against British colonialism.<sup>211</sup> Mulvey’s review is striking first in its echoes of Wollen’s 1964 essay on the same director. Like Wollen, Mulvey speaks in terms of Kubrick’s ‘vision’ and ‘world view’.<sup>212</sup> Just as Wollen described Kubrick’s ‘jejune liberalism’ and argued that ‘[h]is pessimism is cold and obsessive’,<sup>213</sup> Mulvey refers to Kubrick’s ‘highest reaches of Romantic pessimism’, stating that ‘his misanthropy becomes increasingly all-embracing as he leaves behind the remnants of his liberal past’.<sup>214</sup> Second, the article illustrates Mulvey’s background in what is commonly labelled ‘images of women’ criticism, a mode of feminist interpretation concerned to critique negative and distorting representations of women in art, focusing its investigations of content. ‘Never in any of his movies have women been anything more than subservient supports or sex symbols, if indeed they appear at all’, Mulvey writes. In the end, ‘it is impossible to separate the terrible sexist world of *The [sic] Clockwork Orange* from Kubrick’s own vision’.<sup>215</sup> Although Mulvey’s writings are frequently understood as part of a slightly later trend that problematises and surpasses the assumptions and methods of ‘images of women’ criticism, here we can see how her positions emerge from it.

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<sup>210</sup> Anonymous, ‘Why Miss World?’, *7 Days* 1:3 (10 November, 1971), pp. 21-23; Rosalind Delmar, ‘Alexandra Kollontai: Hurrah for the Free Woman!’, *7 Days* 18 (1 March, 1972), p. 16; Rosalind Delmar, ‘What is Feminism?’, *7 Days* 20 (15 March, 1972), p. 20

<sup>211</sup> Mulvey, ‘Introduction to the Second Edition’, p. xxii. Stuart Hall, ‘Life and Times of the First New Left’, *New Left Review* 61 (Jan-Feb, 2010), pp. 177-196

<sup>212</sup> Mulvey, ‘Death Gets a Kiss’, p. 21

<sup>213</sup> Russell, ‘Kubrick’, p. 72

<sup>214</sup> Mulvey, ‘Death Gets a Kiss’, p. 21

<sup>215</sup> Mulvey, ‘Death Gets a Kiss’, p. 21

This point is reinforced by the article's similarities to a contemporaneous review by Beverly Walker in an early issue of *Women and Film*, the first feminist film magazine, a publication whose first issues are often regarded as paradigmatic of the 'images of women' approach.<sup>216</sup>

Also in 1972, Mulvey co-organised the Women's Film event at the Edinburgh Film Festival with Claire Johnston and Lynda Myles.<sup>217</sup> The Women's Film event was the second of many women's film festivals that flourished in the early 1970s,<sup>218</sup> part of a broader trend of feminist cultural archaeology uncovering women's contributions to numerous fields.<sup>219</sup> The stakes of such excavations are articulated in the editorial of a 1973 issue of *Feminist Art Journal*:

Women in all the arts must, at this time, make an all-out effort to rediscover their own history. It is essential that we recognize and credit the first rate achievements of our forebears which have, for so long, been denied or downgraded by established male authorities. We must no longer allow ourselves to be robbed of our heritage past or present.<sup>220</sup>

The festival aimed to screen as many films by women as possible; Mulvey recalls going to the BFI Library to research then-unknown women directors, a formative process as she had hardly seen any films by women until this point.<sup>221</sup> The festival's

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<sup>216</sup> Beverly Houston, 'From Novel to Film: Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange*', *Women and Film* 1:2 (1972), pp. 4-10

<sup>217</sup> Mulvey briefly describes the Women's Film Festival in 'Introduction to the Second Edition', p. xvi

<sup>218</sup> The first took place in New York earlier the same year

<sup>219</sup> See, for instance, the publishing house *Virago*, founded in 1973, which made available previously ignored works by women writers; the exhibition 'Women Artists: 1550-1950', curated by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, shown in numerous North American venues in 1976-1977; and Linda Nochlin's critical reflections on such archaeology, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), pp. 145-178

<sup>220</sup> 'Editorial', *Feminist Art Journal* (Winter, 1973), p. 2, quoted in Lucy Reynolds, "'Whose History?'" *Feminist Advocacy and Experimental Film and Video*, in Sue Clayton and Laura Mulvey (eds.), *Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and Experimental Film in the 1970s* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), p. 140

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014

screening of Dorothy Arzner's *Dance, Girl, Dance*, was especially well-received, and opened the way for Claire Johnston's 1975 edited collection on the director.<sup>222</sup> Mulvey drew two overarching conclusions from her work on the festival. On the one hand, there was women's almost complete exclusion from Hollywood, with the exception of anomalies such as Arzner. On the other hand, 'it was the consistency of women's contribution to the history of avant-garde film, as opposed to near exclusion from the industry, that was striking'.<sup>223</sup> The objective alliance between feminism and the avant-garde would be crucial for Mulvey throughout the decade, something I discuss in detail in chapters three and four.

The accompanying text in the festival program, signed by the three organisers, argues that economic factors have outstripped all others in blocking women's entry to film production: '[t]he bar against women as directors has not sprung out of lack of confidence in women's artistic powers, though no doubt this plays its part. Primarily it exists because a film director is in a position of economic and executive power'.<sup>224</sup> Women's directorial participation in commercial cinema has fluctuated in inverse relation to financial investment – the 1920s saw a period in which 'it was relatively easier for women to make films, simply because there was more independent small-budget production'; then, the period of the dominance of the major studios was the lowest ebb for female directors; but the disintegration of the classical mode of production in Hollywood signals the possibility of a return to greater participation.<sup>225</sup> This argument will be reprised by Mulvey in 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde' in the late 1970s.

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<sup>222</sup> Claire Johnston (ed.), *The Work of Dorothy Arzner: Towards a Feminist Cinema* (London: BFI, 1975)

<sup>223</sup> Mulvey, 'Introduction to the Second Edition', p. xvi

<sup>224</sup> Claire Johnston, Laura Mulvey and Lynda Myles, 'Women's Film Festival', *26<sup>th</sup> Edinburgh International Film Festival* (1972 programme), p. 7

<sup>225</sup> Johnston, Mulvey and Myles, 'Women's Film Festival', p. 7

The authors emphasise that the program is a contribution to the construction of a future women's cinema, which would be something more than 'simply films made by women in a man's cinema'.<sup>226</sup> Exemplifying the emerging anti-realist problematic of British film theory, the text argues that it would not only contest reality as it is currently constituted, but challenge male fantasy, in turn opening up a space for female fantasy:

The fetishistic view which dominates so much of the cinema is as important as the social and psychological portrayal of women characters. Women have to transform cinema myth as well as cinema reality: female fantasy must be released. Women's cinema should impinge on the unconscious as much as men's.<sup>227</sup>

This confrontation with male fantasy and release of female fantasy recurs in the articles on Allen Jones and Penelope Slinger discussed below. As part of the building of women's cinema, the authors argue for 'exploding the whole world of assumptions on which the cinema is built'.<sup>228</sup> The basic premises of cinema need to be identified and dismantled, including the dynamics of viewing, as articulated in a passage that anticipates the basic themes of 'Visual Pleasure':

It is women, particularly, who have always been looked at and undergone the look and gaze of men. They have been encouraged to be exhibitionists to gratify the voyeurism of men. Here too the whole nature of cinema must be put in question, the dynamics of looking at film. Women must question the relationship between looker and looked-at, spectator and spectacle, exhibitionist and voyeur.<sup>229</sup>

Given its status as part of the ongoing construction of women's cinema, the essay has a polemical edge: it makes its points tersely, drawing its lines sharply

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<sup>226</sup> Johnston, Mulvey and Myles, 'Women's Film Festival', p. 7

<sup>227</sup> Johnston, Mulvey and Myles, 'Women's Film Festival', p. 7

<sup>228</sup> Johnston, Mulvey and Myles, 'Women's Film Festival', p. 7

<sup>229</sup> Johnston, Mulvey and Myles, 'Women's Film Festival', p. 7

without pausing to add nuance or qualification, showing a fondness for the bolder modal verbs – can, must, will – in its closing section. This, combined with the way it both surveys its field critically and identifies the paths requiring future exploration, gives it a programmatic, manifesto-like character, just like – as Merck has argued – those later, more well-known texts by two of the three authors here: Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure’, and Claire Johnston’s ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema’.<sup>230</sup>

‘You Don’t Know What is Happening, Do You, Mr Jones’, Mulvey’s article on the pop artist Allen Jones, was published in 1973 in *Spare Rib*.<sup>231</sup> *Spare Rib* sought to ‘put women’s liberation on the news-stands’, having the largest readership of any women’s movement publication in Britain.<sup>232</sup> As Mulvey states, Jones became infamous in the women’s movement after an exhibition of his sculptures at Tooth’s Gallery in London in 1970, ‘in which life-size effigies of women, slave-like and sexually provocative, double[d] as hat-stands, tables and chairs’. Feminists ‘denounced it as supremely exploitative of women’s already exploited image. Women used, women subjugated, women on display: Allen Jones did not miss a trick’.<sup>233</sup> Mulvey’s article takes as its subject matter two books by Jones, placing them on the analyst’s couch: *Figures*, a scrapbook comprising cuttings from magazines, comic books, advertisements, publicity material, film stills and so on, as well as original sketches using the same visual language; and *Projects*, a book of Jones’s plans and drawings for theatre, television and film projects – including plans for *A Clockwork Orange* – most of which were abandoned. Jones’s imaginary is

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<sup>230</sup> Merck, ‘Mulvey’s Manifesto’, p. 8

<sup>231</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘You Don’t Know What is Happening Do You, Mr Jones?’, *Spare Rib* 8 (February, 1973), pp. 13-16 and 30. Reprinted as ‘Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious or “You don’t know what is happening do you, Mr Jones?”’, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 6-13. My citations are from the latter

<sup>232</sup> The magazine was founded in 1972 and sold 20,000 copies of its first issue (at its height *Shrew* achieved a circulation of about 5,000). David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women’s Liberation in Britain and the USA* (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 100-101.

<sup>233</sup> Mulvey, ‘Mr Jones’, p. 6

remarkably consistent: images of barely-clothed women, in poses of sexualised submission and, occasionally, dominance, demonstrating a persistent fascination with discipline and punishment, bondage, and skin-tight fabrics like latex.

‘Mr Jones’ continues the focus on objectification from ‘Miss World’ – Jones’s mannequins literally objectified women, turning them into furniture. At the same time it inaugurates a new phase with the appearance of psychoanalysis, marked by the article’s epigram from Freud’s ‘Medusa’s Head’ essay – from this point Mulvey’s feminism will develop in dialogue with psychoanalysis.<sup>234</sup> The encounter with Freud is traceable to the History Group. For Mulvey, Freud

was bringing up the question of the Oedipus complex and the construction of femininity and femininity as a problem, and fetishism, and out of fetishism the way that femininity and the female body was a problem for the male psyche – all these things we all found absolutely fascinating, and it was the first time that we got a vocabulary, as it were, with which we could formulate the questions which we thought were relevant. So it wasn’t that we thought that Freud had the answers, but he did offer, literally, words and concepts that meant we could address what we felt were these problems that couldn’t be articulated.<sup>235</sup>

It is Freud’s account of fetishism that guides Mulvey’s interpretation of Jones. In Freud’s argument, the little boy must disavow the discovery of the girl’s ‘missing’ penis and put a substitute (the fetish) in its place to avoid confronting the horrifying possibility of his own castration, although paradoxically this substitute also acts as a memorial to castration’s possibility.<sup>236</sup> Mulvey identifies three trends in Jones’s work: ‘woman plus phallic substitute’, ‘woman minus phallus, punished and

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<sup>234</sup> For the determining role played by ‘Mr Jones’ and ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ in the development of feminist psychoanalytic criticism, see Griselda Pollock, ‘Art’, in Elizabeth Wright (ed.), *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1992), pp. 9-16

<sup>235</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014

<sup>236</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Fetishism’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XXI (1927-1931)*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961), pp. 152-157

humiliated, often by woman plus phallus' and 'woman as phallus'.<sup>237</sup> In the first, near-naked women appear alongside substitute phalluses like 'guns, cigarettes, erect nipples', and so on.<sup>238</sup> In the second, women without such substitutes are punished by those with. Finally, in the last category women themselves become phalluses.<sup>239</sup> All these cases are interpreted as a defence against male fear of castration, replaying Freud's analysis of the Medusa's head, the proliferation of substitute phalluses functioning as the multiplied snakes did for Freud, as psychological cover for fear of losing the penis.<sup>240</sup>

There is a shift of attention here, away from woman as spectacle and towards male psychology, 'the psyche that [has] need of such a spectacle',<sup>241</sup> reflected in the contrast between the titles 'Miss World' and 'Mr Jones'. Jones's work is analysed as a symptomatic product of the male unconscious. The 'strange male underworld of fear and desire'<sup>242</sup> his work represents shines a beam of light on the mythology of a 'world that revolves on a phallic axis'.<sup>243</sup> The books by Jones that Mulvey discusses draw from across the media, organising a larger social imaginary. Jones combines bondage with 'respectable' imagery, highlighting the fetishism of mainstream visual culture. 'The language which he speaks is the language of fetishism', Mulvey writes, 'which speaks to all of us every day, but whose exact grammar and syntax we are usually only dimly aware of. Fetishistic obsession reveals the meaning behind popular images of women.'<sup>244</sup> Mulvey extends Freud's account of fetishism – in

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<sup>237</sup> Mulvey, 'Mr Jones', p. 8

<sup>238</sup> Mulvey, 'Mr Jones', p. 8

<sup>239</sup> Mulvey, 'Mr Jones', p. 8-10

<sup>240</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Medusa's Head', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVIII (1920-1922)*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), p. 273

<sup>241</sup> Mulvey, 'Introduction to the First Edition', p. xxxiv

<sup>242</sup> Mulvey, 'Mr Jones', p. 8.

<sup>243</sup> Mulvey, 'Mr Jones', p. 11

<sup>244</sup> Mulvey, 'Mr Jones', p. 7.



which only certain men are fetishists – to patriarchal culture as a whole. Jones’s revelations are unconscious, however, hence the essay title’s citation of Bob Dylan’s ‘Ballad of a Thin Man’: the artist speaks without knowing the meaning of what he says. The psychoanalytic critic brings this speech to consciousness.<sup>245</sup> The political strategy Mulvey proposes here is not for women to disrupt the dominant spectacle, as in ‘Miss World’, but to gain control of the means of representation:

Women are constantly being confronted with their own image in one form or another, but what they see bears little relation or relevance to their own unconscious fantasies, their own hidden fears and desires. [...] Women are simply the scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies. The time has come for us to take over the show and exhibit our own fears and desires.<sup>246</sup>

As Christine Gledhill has shown, the claim that images of women are primarily expressions of male fantasy is common in early feminist film criticism.<sup>247</sup> Indeed, Johnston cites Mulvey’s essay when making this argument in ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema’.<sup>248</sup>

Mulvey reflects later that the stress on castration and fetishism in ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ could have been a ‘hangover’ from ‘Mr Jones’.<sup>249</sup> Mandy Merck observes that the imperative for women to ‘take over the show’ and the emphasis on masculine fantasy also first appeared in the earlier article.<sup>250</sup>

Furthermore, in a prescient section, ‘Mr Jones’ describes the formal properties of

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<sup>245</sup> Jones contested this interpretation at the time and continues to do so. See “‘Well…….’”, Allen Jones replies to Su Braden, Art editor of Time Out’, *Spare Rib* 8, p. 16; and Nicholas Wroe, ‘Allen Jones: “I think of myself as a feminist”’, *Guardian* (31 October, 2014), online at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/oct/31/allen-jones-i-think-of-myself-as-a-feminist> (accessed 8 January, 2018)

<sup>246</sup> Mulvey, ‘Mr Jones’, p. 13

<sup>247</sup> Christine Gledhill, ‘Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism’, *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3:4 (1978), pp. 458-459

<sup>248</sup> Claire Johnston, ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema’, in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Vol. 1*, p. 211

<sup>249</sup> Mulvey, ‘Introduction to the Second Edition’, p. xv.

<sup>250</sup> Merck, ‘Mulvey’s Manifesto’, p. 3

Jones's work for *Männer Wir Kommen*, made for West German television, as themselves a kind of fetishism: '[t]he close-ups and superimpositions possible on television give him [Jones] the chance to exploit ambiguities of changed scale and proportion. The spectator is stripped of normal perceptual defences (perspective, normal size relationships) and exposed to illusion and fantasy on screen'.<sup>251</sup> The proposition in 'Visual Pleasure' that the formal conventions of Hollywood cinema are themselves fetishistic – 'cinematic codes [...] producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire' (VPNC, 26) – is therefore sketched in 'Mr Jones'.

If 'Mr Jones' ends with an incitement to women to end their objectification by seizing the means of representation, Mulvey's article on Penelope Slinger, 'The Hole Truth', published in *Spare Rib* nine months after the Jones piece, addresses this by investigating a female artist who, in contrast to Jones's exemplification of the male unconscious, provides 'graphic images of phantasy which only a woman could have produced'.<sup>252</sup> The objects and images in Slinger's exhibition *Openings* (at Angela Flowers gallery) and book *50% The Visible Woman* create chains of connotations through 'puns, allusions and analogies'.<sup>253</sup> *Openings* uses the motif of wedding cakes: *Happy Anniversary* is a model of a cake that opens into a doll's house, with a kitchen, dining room and bathroom on its three levels, encasing the domestic sphere within the wedding object. Another, a photographic collage, shows a woman wearing a wedding cake as though it were a bra and corset, while the groom uses a large knife (later transformed into an erect penis) to cut himself a piece. The method, as Mulvey notes, suggests both Surrealism and Freud.<sup>254</sup> In Mulvey's argument, Slinger's endeavour is crucial in its working through of these

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<sup>251</sup> Mulvey, 'Mr Jones', p. 9

<sup>252</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'The Hole Truth', *Spare Rib* 17 (November, 1973), p. 37

<sup>253</sup> Mulvey, 'The Hole Truth', p. 37

<sup>254</sup> Mulvey, 'The Hole Truth', p. 37

psychological issues of femininity, for ‘until women can confront their own unconscious phantasies, as long as they continue to be captivated by those of men, they will be out of touch with the content of their own minds and victims of the repression which allots them their place in society even to their own satisfaction’.<sup>255</sup> If ‘Mr Jones’ debouches into *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons* (1974), which also interrogates images of women produced by the ‘strange male underworld of fear and desire’, ‘The Hole Truth’ points forward to the meditations on the female unconscious and trajectory through the Oedipus complex in *Riddles of the Sphinx*, *The Bad Sister* and ‘Afterthoughts on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”’.

In Daney’s words, criticism is ‘an eternal return to a fundamental pleasure’.<sup>256</sup> The wager of the patient excavation of Mulvey and Wollen’s early texts undertaken in this chapter is that the impulses that animate them resurface in later, better-known works, although I would modify Daney’s statement by speaking of fundamental *fascinations*, in order to capture the ambivalence of Mulvey’s interest in Allen Jones’s work, for instance. Mulvey’s detection of the male unconscious as a structuring force behind artistic form, her positing of the historic space for women directors in the avant-garde, and her affirmation of the need to release female fantasy all reappear in more prominent texts in the following years. Similarly, Wollen continually circles back to the status of formal strategies in a leftist political aesthetics, the need to emphasise problems of language in the field of film, and the work of Godard as a lodestar for a contemporary critical cinema. For both, early experiences such as cinephilia and the History Group are determinants of future work.

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<sup>255</sup> Mulvey, ‘The Hole Truth’, p. 37

<sup>256</sup> Daney, ‘Les Cahiers du Cinema 1968-1977’

My sifting of Mulvey and Wollen's writings of the late 1960s and early 1970s also enables one to discern the various parallels that exist between the two figures at this point. Both play with or subvert traditional authorship – Wollen through pseudonymity, Mulvey through anonymity and collaboration. Both eagerly incorporate theoretical frameworks (psychoanalysis in Mulvey's case, semiotics and structuralism in Wollen's), which provide a critical method and an idiom for precisely articulating ideas or experiences that are seen to be improperly understood. Both engage in historical revaluation: Wollen asserts the continued importance of Eisenstein, re-reading film history through modernism (as he will do again in 'The Two Avant-Gardes') and reconstructing the Soviet filmmaker through the prism of contemporary semiotic theory; Mulvey carries out a feminist archaeology through her organisation of the Women's Event at Edinburgh. The fertile ground for a filmmaking collaboration is implicit here, yet this chapter has shown how Mulvey's activities were circumscribed by gender (as in the psychological blockage on her writing, for instance) in a way that Wollen's were not, and consequently the central role taken on in her work by the women's movement. The collaboration that is possible, then, is surely distinct from a collaboration between women – even if one allows for significant differences and even contradictory interests *within* feminism, on the grounds of sexuality, race, and so on. Mulvey's use of the term 'objective alliance' to describe the relation that became possible in the 1970s between feminism and the avant-garde is therefore astute, in that it condenses both the overlapping grounds and aims of Mulvey and Wollen's filmmaking partnership, and its basis in a dislocation in terms of the positions from which the two of them speak.

My exploration of *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons* in chapter two is based on the tentative assertion that this leads to films characterised by the intersection,

layering and montage of devices and themes with divergent origins. I trace *Penthesilea*'s superimposition of counter-cinematic strategies with a radical ideology critique of a particular mythical female image. The film draws on Mulvey's essay on Allen Jones, but it also bases itself on the account of counter-cinema and the positing of the functional identity between avant-garde artistic forms and ideology critique that Wollen was working through in his writings of the early 1970s. The first three sections of chapter two therefore carry out a series of close readings of these Wollen texts, to produce a case study of the relationship between theory and practice in Mulvey and Wollen's work of the early 1970s.

## Chapter 2 – Semiotics/Ideology/Counter-cinema<sup>1</sup>

### ‘Art in Revolution’

In 1968’s ‘Cinema and Semiology: Some Points of Contact’, Wollen writes that ‘it is still very difficult to reconstruct the intellectual climate of Russia in the twenties, and it would be useful to know much more not only about the theatrical work and ideas of [Vsevolod] Meyerhold, but also of [Nikolai] Foregger, [Sergei] Tretyakov, and the full extent of the writings of the Russian Formalists on cinema’. While Wollen observes that critics such as Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eikhenbaum and Osip Brik contributed to film productions, he laments the small number of translations of these works.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1970s Wollen contributes to rectifying this. In 1971, *Screen* – whose editorial board Wollen had joined the same year – published translations of documents from the Soviet journals *Lef* and *Novy Lef*, extracts from Lev Kuleshov’s *Art of the Cinema*, and film scenarios written by Vladimir Mayakovsky in the 1920s, along with contextualising essays. Wollen wrote the introduction for the Mayakovsky scenarios.<sup>3</sup> Wollen’s most extended engagement with this historical moment is ‘Art in Revolution’, published the same year, a sketch of the shifting currents in Soviet art in the late 1910s and 1920s.<sup>4</sup> The forging of an aesthetic and political genealogy linking the Soviet Union in the 1920s and early 1930s with Western Europe (and, to a lesser degree, North America) in the 1960s

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<sup>1</sup> My title alludes to the triadic titles common in radical criticism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, ‘Cinema/Ideology/Criticism’, trans. Susan Bennett, *Screen* 12:1 (Spring, 1971); and ‘Aesthetics/Ideology/Cinema’, the subtitle of *Afterimage* 5 (Autumn, 1974), edited by Noël Burch

<sup>2</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Cinema and Semiology: Some Points of Contact’, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 9-10

<sup>3</sup> *Screen* 12:4 (Winter 1971)

<sup>4</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Art in Revolution: Russian Art in the Twenties’, *Studio International*, vol. 181, no. 3 (April 1971), pp. 149-154. Reprinted as ‘Art in Revolution’ in *Readings and Writings*, pp. 65-78. The essay was originally written as a review of the 1971 Hayward Gallery exhibition ‘Art in Revolution: Soviet Art and Design Since 1917’ curated by Camilla Gray

and 1970s is part of a larger trend, visible in journals such as *Screen*, *Afterimage*, *Artforum* and *October* (exemplified particularly in the latter two publications by Annette Michelson),<sup>5</sup> and in filmmaking collectives such as the Dziga Vertov Group, led by Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, and the Medvedkin Group, associated with Chris Marker and the occupations at Besançon, both of which named themselves after Soviet filmmakers.<sup>6</sup> These writers and filmmakers sought to raise questions asked in the earlier epoch, learn from and build on Soviet lessons, and re-actualise these ideas in a later historical moment.

The intersection of ‘Art in Revolution’, between art in a revolutionary situation and a revolution in art itself, held obvious appeal for Wollen. The search for a modern, scientific and revolutionary aesthetics that drew Wollen to Eisenstein applies here. The Soviet Union in this period could be seen as a laboratory – to use a metaphor favoured by *Lef* – where different theories and practices were developed and tried out in quick succession, offering a case study of leftist art and aesthetics in a revolutionary context. The collaboration and exchange between artists in different disciplines and between theorists and practitioners is crucial here, something strongly emphasised in Sam Rohdie’s editorial for the 1971 *Screen* issue: in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, ‘[f]ilms were both experiments and counters in a debate; they were the practice of certain theories and the theorising of a practice. Practice

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<sup>5</sup> *Screen* 15:3 (Autumn, 1974), contained translations of Brik and Eikhenbaum; Stephen Crofts and Olivia Rose, ‘An Essay Towards *Man with a Movie Camera*’, *Screen* 18:1 (Spring, 1977), pp. 9-58; Stephen Crofts and Masha Enzensberger, ‘Medvedkin: Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion’, *Screen* 19:1 (Spring, 1978), pp. 71-77, and Martin Walsh, ‘The Political Joke in Happiness’, pp. 79-89 in the same issue; Christoph Giercke, ‘Dziga Vertov’, *Afterimage* 1 (April, 1970), unpaginated; Annette Michelson, ‘“The Man with a Movie Camera”: From Magician to Epistemologist’, *Artforum* 10:7 (March, 1972), pp. 60-72; and *Artforum* 11:5 (January, 1973), a special issue on Stan Brakhage and Sergei Eisenstein edited by Michelson. *October* was co-founded by Michelson and named in reference to both the October revolution and Eisenstein’s film. See Sergei Eisenstein, ‘Notes for a Film of *Capital*’, trans. Maciej Sliwoski, Jay Leyda and Annette Michelson, *October* 2 (Summer, 1976), pp. 3-26, and Annette Michelson, ‘Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital*’, pp. 26-38 in the same issue; see also *October* 7 (Winter, 1978), a special issue on Soviet revolutionary culture

<sup>6</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Perhaps...’, *October* 88 (Spring, 1999), p. 44

and theory went together, as indeed they must, reflecting and modifying each other.<sup>7</sup>

I will briefly draw out three aspects of Wollen's argument that are significant for his ideas in the years after 1971. First, for Wollen, 'the underlying problem [in Soviet radical art and theory] was that of the relationship between the working class and the revolutionary intelligentsia'.<sup>8</sup> On one side was an avant-garde rallying to the revolution (the overlapping factions of Futurism, Constructivism, Suprematism, Lef). On the other side were proletarian groups, notably Proletkult, a mass organisation with more than half a million members by 1920, seeking to foster proletarian artists and culture.<sup>9</sup> The two tendencies shared a desire to make a break with the culture of the past, a fascination with technology and the urban, and a militant outlook.<sup>10</sup> Yet they 'represent different concepts'.<sup>11</sup> Lef, led by Brik and Mayakovsky, was a small grouping of some fifteen members mostly from bourgeois backgrounds,<sup>12</sup> with a magazine that 'aimed at a circulation of 5,000 but in fact had difficulty getting into four figures'.<sup>13</sup> It saw itself as the most advanced artistic faction and therefore entitled to a leadership role. An editorial in the first issue of *Lef* in 1923 argues that the most advanced elements of Proletkult are '*re-learning with our things as guides*, and, we believe, will go further with us', in other words, taking guidance from Lef.<sup>14</sup> As Wollen observes, 'this tone was not going to make it easy

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<sup>7</sup> Sam Rohdie, 'Editorial', *Screen*, 12:4 (Winter 1971), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', p. 68

<sup>9</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', pp. 66-67

<sup>10</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', pp. 67-68. See also Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 100; Halina Stephan, '*LEF*' and the Left *Front of the Arts* (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1981), p. 12

<sup>11</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', p. 67

<sup>12</sup> Stephan, "*LEF*", p. 30

<sup>13</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', p. 74

<sup>14</sup> N. Aseev, B. Arvatov, O. Brik, B. Kushner, V. Mayakovsky, S. Tretyakov, N. Chuzhak, 'What is *Lef* Fighting For?', trans. Richard Sherwood, *Screen*, 12:4 (Winter, 1971), p. 34; Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', p. 76



for avant-garde artists to find friends among the masses'.<sup>15</sup> At the opposite pole to Lef's arrogation of leadership was a suspicion of intellectuals among the working class. For Wollen this explains the paradoxical attempt by some artists to eliminate themselves as a group, as in the Constructivist demand that the artist should enter the factory and become a worker.<sup>16</sup> In effect, this is a replay in art of Marxist arguments concerning the importance of leadership by intellectuals vs. spontaneity on the part of the working class. The contradictions of the radical intellectual are registered at various points in Mulvey and Wollen's work, as I show in my final chapter's discussion of *Crystal Gazing*.

Second, according to Wollen, the increasing functionalism of Soviet art entailed a grave loss in art's semantic aspect.<sup>17</sup> Wollen's polemic here seems to be with production art. 'The real problem was that expressed by Lissitsky', Wollen writes, 'to find a way in which Constructivism could intervene, not simply in the production process but in everyday life and, for this to happen, there must be some recognition of the psychic and semiotic dimension of art'.<sup>18</sup> The idea of an art that doesn't make signification central is anathema to Wollen, as might already be suggested by his semiotic explorations of the late 1960s. This is made explicit in a short 1971 intervention in the *Screen* issue that translated *Lef* and *Novy Lef* documents, in which Wollen replies to a text by Stanley Mitchell on Futurism. Here, Wollen identifies semiotics with aesthetics, stating that '[t]he material of aesthetics consists of texts and artefacts, seen as semiotic productions of a particular kind'.<sup>19</sup> The stake of this signifying facet of art, Wollen argues, is politics. By expunging the

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<sup>15</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', p. 76

<sup>16</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', p. 68

<sup>17</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', pp. 76-77

<sup>18</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', p. 76

<sup>19</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Some Thoughts Arising from Stanley Mitchell's Article', *Screen*, 12:4 (Winter 1971), pp. 165-166

semantic dimension of art in favour of functionalism, production art eliminated the possibility of grasping art's ideological aspect.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the functionalism generated by the increasing politicisation of the avant-garde under the pressure of developments in the Soviet Union through the 1920s, led, Wollen claims, to a paradoxical de-politicisation, a 'hyper-political de-politicization'.<sup>21</sup>

Third, in the essay's eschatological conclusion, after describing Malevich's funeral Wollen writes that '*Proletcult* was dead. The peasant singers were dead. *LEF* was dead. Now Malevich was dead. One day all the white coffins will re-open and the phantoms will emerge to resume combat'.<sup>22</sup> The dead figures of a lost utopian, revolutionary moment will return to struggle anew. 'Art in Revolution' is an attempt to gather reinforcements for a forthcoming battle. Such ghostly imagery has a long Marxist lineage, going back to the 'spectre haunting Europe' in the *Communist Manifesto*. In particular, the passage recalls Marx's assertion in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that

just when [living human beings] appear to be revolutionising themselves and their circumstances, in creating something unprecedented, in just such epochs of revolutionary crisis, that is *when they nervously summon up the spirits of the past*, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, uniforms, in order to enact new scenes in world history, but in this time-honoured guise and with this borrowed language.<sup>23</sup>

For Marx, 'the awakening of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles', as well as 'of magnifying the given task in the

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<sup>20</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', p. 77

<sup>21</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', p. 77. Wollen's argument would seem to accurately represent what Devin Fore terms 'first generation production art', but fail to distinguish between this and other, similar Soviet avant-garde movements of the 1920s, such as factography. See Devin Fore, 'Introduction', *October* 118 (Fall, 2006) (special issue on Russian Factography), p. 5. For Soviet productivism, see also Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (London and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005)

<sup>22</sup> Wollen, 'Art in Revolution', p. 78

<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 32, my emphasis

imagination' and 'finding once more the spirit of revolution'.<sup>24</sup> Yet as a learner of a language is only competent when they no longer have to mentally re-translate it into their native tongue, so too it is necessary ultimately to drop the clothes and speech of the past in favour of costumes and language appropriate to a new historical epoch.<sup>25</sup> When Wollen writes 'Art in Revolution' he is still at the stage of summoning up the spirits of the past; although he will continue to cite the historical avant-gardes, beginning with 1972's 'Godard and Counter Cinema' the invocations of an earlier era are secondary, as Wollen concentrates on elaborating an aesthetics particular to the radical cinema of the 1970s.

Wollen's imagery of coffins re-opening, with its religious associations of resurrection, conveys not merely appropriation of the past but doing justice to it, bringing to mind Walter Benjamin's aphorisms on history, in which present struggles can redeem earlier generations. 'The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption', writes Benjamin, going on to state that 'there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one'.<sup>26</sup> Much of Wollen's writing of the 1970s can be seen as an artistic version of this idea, to redeem modernism by consolidating the decisive break an earlier generation made,<sup>27</sup> as I indicate below.

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<sup>24</sup> Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 33

<sup>25</sup> Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 32

<sup>26</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', trans. Harry Zohn, *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 390

<sup>27</sup> Wollen, 'Some Thoughts Arising', p. 163

## **‘The Text is the Factory Where Thought is at Work’: Semiotics and Modernism**

A third, revised edition of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* appeared in 1972. In the new version Wollen rid the book of two appendices, the note on ‘Style and Stylistics’ and the Pantheon, marking a move away from the critical, methodological leanings recounted in my first chapter.<sup>28</sup> The disappearance of the Pantheon was also a conspicuous symptom of the *auteur*’s increasingly marginal and problematic status in Wollen’s writing. Most significantly, Wollen replaced the original 1969 Conclusion, characterised by pedagogical reflections apparently informed by his employment at the BFI Education Department, with an aesthetic tract exploring the intersection of modernism and semiotics. Rodowick, in his Foreword to the 2013 edition of *Signs and Meaning*, writes that ‘[h]aving paved the way for examining film in the context of structuralism in 1969, and at a time when we had hardly absorbed these lessons, the 1972 Conclusion marks a key turning point in the discourse of signification, opening it out towards post-structuralism and the concerns of political modernism’.<sup>29</sup> A constellation of new ideas makes its entry here – modernism as an art of the sign, reading as work, meaning as something produced by reader and text together. For Rodowick, this new conclusion ‘reframe[s] the whole of [Wollen’s] argument in anticipation of a new critical space’ – that of theory.<sup>30</sup>

To understand the central argument of the 1972 Conclusion it is helpful to look at a short essay Wollen published the year before in *Screen*, entitled ‘Some

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<sup>28</sup> D. N. Rodowick, ‘Foreword’, in Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, fifth edition (London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. xii

<sup>29</sup> Rodowick, ‘Foreword’, p. xii

<sup>30</sup> Rodowick, ‘Foreword’, p. xiii

Thoughts Arising from Stanley Mitchell's Article', in which Wollen outlines a three-stage chronology of classicism, romanticism and modernism.<sup>31</sup> Wollen's account is based on a linguistic template. Classical aesthetics, Wollen argues, was premised on the Enlightenment philosophies contemporary with it, whether rationalist (as in René Descartes) or empiricist (as in John Locke), which 'saw language as fundamentally secondary to thought. Ideas were formed in the mind, more or less without the intervention of language, whether because of innate faculties or abstraction from sense impressions, and then *expressed* through means of language'. 'Ideas came first and expression second', Wollen reiterates. The work of art was construed in the same terms: content was primary, form a more or less imperfect vehicle for its transportation. The classical artist's role was to transmit content as transparently as possible, hence classicism's privileging of 'skill and craftsmanship'.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, reacting against this idea, '[i]t became a Romantic dogma or platitude that thought and language were inseparable. [...] Similarly content and form were inseparable'.<sup>33</sup> Rather than seeing language as an instrument for thought, romanticism identified the two. This claim led to an emphasis, not on technique, but on '[i]nspiration and creativity', as well as the importance of concepts like 'identification' and 'empathy' in response to artworks, since art was no longer seen as communication.<sup>34</sup> Both positions, Wollen argues, are idealist, and will be challenged by the materialist conception inherent in modernism.<sup>35</sup>

The 1972 Conclusion bases itself on the same framework. Wollen recapitulates his claim that during the Enlightenment artists were thought to produce

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<sup>31</sup> Wollen, 'Some Thoughts Arising'

<sup>32</sup> Wollen, 'Some Thoughts Arising', pp. 162-163

<sup>33</sup> Wollen, 'Some Thoughts Arising', pp. 162-163

<sup>34</sup> Wollen, 'Some Thoughts Arising', p. 163

<sup>35</sup> Wollen, 'Some Thoughts Arising', pp. 163-164

worlds in their imagination, to which they then gave expression (*SM*, 137). This classical conception remains dominant, Wollen argues, in the contemporary linguistics of Jakobson, Chomsky and others. These linguists treat signs as simple instruments of communication: an individual has an idea in their mind; using a code (language) they map this onto a set of representations (words, sounds) which form a signal; another individual with access to the same code decodes the signal and obtains the original idea (*SM*, 136-137).<sup>36</sup> On this view of language, the task of criticism is ‘clarifying the decoding of symbols in order to restore the original message as fully as possible’ (*SM*, 137). As Rodowick points out, the account of communication that Wollen is criticising here is particularly close to the one proposed by Jakobson, despite Jakobson’s influence on Wollen, and even though paradoxically Wollen’s understanding of the modernist artwork can be understood through Jakobson’s model, as a message oriented towards its code (something I will develop in my account of *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons*).<sup>37</sup> It is at points such as this, as with the influence of Barthes and Kristeva described below, that we can see the poststructuralist elements that inhabit Wollen’s early 1970s writing.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The relevant passages are glossed in greater detail by D. N. Rodowick in *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*, second edition (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 47-8

<sup>37</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis of Political Modernism*, pp. 64-65n7. Jakobson’s model (reproduced from Roman Jakobson, ‘Linguistics and Poetics’, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 66) is as follows:

	CONTEXT	
ADDRESSER	MESSAGE	ADDRESSEE
	CONTACT	
	CODE	

Wollen was familiar with Jakobson’s model, having reproduced it in ‘The Concept of Communication(s): Draft for Discussion’, paper presented to BFI Education Department seminar, 15 May 1969, p. 7

<sup>38</sup> For instance, see the parallel here with Julia Kristeva, ‘The System and the Speaking Subject’, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 27-28

In contrast, modernism, in the period immediately before the First World War (*SM*, 133),<sup>39</sup> broke with this instrumental model. Rather than trying to access the content lying behind an artwork's form, it stressed the formal characteristics of artworks (or more specifically, their processes of signification, since as we have seen, Wollen construes artworks on a textual model):

One of the main effects of the 'modern movement' was to discredit the ideas of 'intention' and of 'content'. [...] The really important breakthrough [...] came in the rejection of the traditional idea of a work as primarily a representation of something else, whether an idea or the real world, and the concentration of attention on the text of the work itself and the signs from which it was constructed. (*SM*, 138)

This reconfigured both artistic production ('writing') and reception ('reading'). The reader was no longer simply the passive recipient of a message (the addressee in Jakobson's model); rather, in attempting to decode the message the reader became a co-producer:

in the past, the difficulty of reading was simply to find the correct code, to clear up ambiguities or areas of ignorance. Once the code was known reading became automatic [...]. But Modernism makes reading difficult in another sense, not to find the code or grasp the ideas, the 'content', but to make the process of decoding itself difficult, so that to read is to work. Reading becomes problematic; [...] the reader has to play his own part in its own production. [...] Just as the author no longer 'finds' the words, but must 'produce' a text, so the reader too must work within the text. The old image of the reader as consumer is broken. (*SM*, 140)

This notion of the reader-as-producer echoes other modernist theories of art.

Discussing Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre in 'The Author as Producer', Benjamin writes that 'this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators'.<sup>40</sup> Similar formulations

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<sup>39</sup> See also Wollen, 'Some Thoughts Arising', p. 163

<sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London and New York: Verso, 1998), p. 98

can be found in writers associated with the French journal *Tel Quel*,<sup>41</sup> and in Barthes, who states that reading is work and that the ‘writerly’ text aims to make the reader a producer rather than a consumer of meaning.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Barthes’s distinction between the ‘readerly’ (*lisible*), classic text, and the ‘writerly’ (*scriptible*), modern text, strongly evokes Wollen’s distinction between classical and modernist paradigms. Barthes’s description of the ‘readerly’, for instance, emphasises the antecedence of content that Wollen discerned in classical aesthetics: ‘the classic author is like an artisan bent over the workbench of meaning and selecting the best *expressions* for the concept he has already formed’.<sup>43</sup>

However, the problem with modernism, to Wollen’s mind, is that it was unconscious of the reassessment of the thought-language relation latent in its own activities. For this it required semiotics: ‘modern art was searching for a semiology which would enable it to break with the Renaissance tradition, but which had still to be elaborated, and perhaps could not be elaborated until the need for it was felt’ (*SM*, 139). This is despite modernism’s historical breakthrough being concurrent with Saussure’s groundwork in semiology and Freud’s elaboration of some of his key psychoanalytic concepts (*SM*, 133). These figures ‘revolutionised our ideas about language’<sup>44</sup> in a way that should have provided the philosophical foundation for modernism. Yet modernism, for the most part, missed the possibility of such an exchange. Its attempts at self-theorisation are denigrated by Wollen, who deems the avant-garde’s philosophical background ‘a dismal mixture of theosophy, Worringer,

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<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, Jean-Louis Baudry, ‘Writing, Fiction, Ideology’, trans. Diana Matias, *Afterimage* 5 (Spring, 1974), pp. 30-31, originally published in *Theorie d’Ensemble* (Paris: Seuil, 1968)

<sup>42</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 4 and 10, originally Paris: Seuil, 1970. Wollen’s documents from this period include notes on Barthes’s text emphasising the readerly/writerly distinction. See untitled document on *S/Z* in ‘Film Theory 2 (ancient)’, Item 100, Box B, Peter Wollen archive, BFI Special Collections, London

<sup>43</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 173

<sup>44</sup> Wollen, ‘Some Thoughts Arising’, p. 164



Frazer, bits of Bergson, even Bradley' (*SM*, 139). Without a scientific theory modernism was perpetually sliding away from its own originality, mystically conceiving of artworks as purely natural objects or winding up in a functionalism that turned art into production, both of which denied art's signifying features (*SM*, 138-139). The two exceptions to this were the interactions within the Soviet avant-garde between artists and Formalist critics, and the Surrealist engagement with Freud somewhat later (*SM*, 139). I have already indicated the attention Wollen paid to the former. With respect to the latter, in a short 1972 article in *7 Days*, Wollen argued for the importance of Surrealism because it 'was the first movement which brought together the artistic avant-garde with the revolutionary thought of both Marx and Freud'.<sup>45</sup> It is the emphasis on the unconscious that Wollen sees as the Surrealists' greatest achievement and the place where they advanced over other figures such as Brecht and Eisenstein. However, Wollen notes André Breton's limited understanding of Marx and Freud, whom he assimilated to a Romantic paradigm whose enemy was the rule of reason – it was here that the Surrealist project faltered. It is precisely because of such missteps on the part of avant-garde movements that '[i]t has been correspondingly easy for bourgeois society to turn these victories into defeats and re-absorb the avant-garde into its own institutions and world-view'.<sup>46</sup>

For Wollen, the theory that modernism needed was an articulation of the functioning of language, and of the organisation of sign systems more generally. Semiotics would have raised to consciousness the positions implicit in modernist practices. It would have shown that a text is 'a material object which provides the conditions for the production of meaning, under constraints which it sets itself' (*SM*,

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Surrealism', *7 Days* 11 (12 January 1972), p. 20

<sup>46</sup> Wollen, 'Surrealism', p. 20

140). The text would be seen as ‘the location of thought, rather than the mind. The text is the factory where thought is at work, rather than the transport system which conveys the finished product’ (*SM*, 141). A modernist artwork would be understood as ‘a material object whose significance is determined not by a code external to it, mechanically, nor organically as a symbolic whole, but through its own interrogation of its own code’ (*SM*, 139) – in other words as having a reflexive, epistemological function, examining the terms of its own meaning. Modernism would be reconceptualised after the fact, in a structure we can compare to Freud’s notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (‘deferred action’ or ‘belatedness’), in which a psychological event is retroactively worked over and given meaning in the context of later experience.<sup>47</sup> In like manner, the development of semiotics by the early 1970s allows the modernist rupture, improperly understood in its own time, to retroactively be accorded its proper meaning. In this way, as Rodowick observes, one could ‘regain the originary, “materialist” emphasis of modernism’.<sup>48</sup>

Although Wollen’s semiotics retains a Peircean element, the central concept in the 1972 Conclusion is ‘code’, a system that organises signs, a term we can also track in contemporaneous works by Barthes, Christian Metz and in *Cahiers du cinéma*.<sup>49</sup> This is a shift of focus away from the indexicality of the cinematic image central in the 1969 edition of *Signs and Meaning*. In this, Wollen follows Metz’s trajectory, who between his essays of the mid-1960s collected in *Film Language* and his 1971 book *Language and Cinema* transferred his interest from ‘minimal units’

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<sup>47</sup> Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac, 2004), pp. 111-113

<sup>48</sup> *Crisis*, p. 46. Rodowick is referring here to Wollen’s later essay ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’, but as Rodowick remarks, the same idea is present in the 1972 Conclusion

<sup>49</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*, pp. 17-18; Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1974), originally *Langage et cinéma* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1971); editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, ‘John Ford’s *Young Mr Lincoln*’, *Screen* 13:3 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 6, 34, originally in *Cahiers du cinéma* 223 (1970)

(as in his detailed investigation of the divergence between shot and word) to the numerous codes whose interplay constitutes cinema. The 1972 Conclusion also recapitulates the attack on realism found in ‘Eisenstein’s Aesthetics’ and ‘The Semiology of the Cinema’, now understood via the communication model. Realist accounts of cinema, in their equation or near-equation of the camera’s images of reality with reality itself, are a form of romanticism. Due to ‘the predominantly indexical-iconic character of most films and the “illusion of reality” which the cinema provides’, film is prone to ‘semiological mystification’, perhaps to a greater degree than any other art. ‘The cinema seems to fulfil the age-old dream of providing a means of communication in which the signals employed are themselves identical or near identical with the world which is the object of thought’, Wollen writes (*SM*, 142). Wollen adds that the realist aesthetic is reliant upon ‘a monstrous delusion: the idea that truth resides in the real world and can be picked out by the camera’ (*SM*, 142), thus manifesting the inflection into an anti-realist aesthetic of Louis Althusser’s attack on empiricism (understood as the ideology of a subject’s access to knowledge by a process of extraction from an object) that would become common in *Screen* in the years following.<sup>50</sup>

Wollen has two, interrelated conceptions of how the political effects of modernism can be reconceived in light of semiotics. The first is a mimetic model, in which gaps in the text produce gaps in the mind of the viewer, exploding bourgeois society’s ideology of wholeness. The reader would be

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<sup>50</sup> For another example, see Colin MacCabe, ‘Realism and the Cinema’, *Screen* 15:2 (Summer, 1974), p. 12. For Althusser’s understanding of empiricism, see Louis Althusser, ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’, pp. 190-191, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 251. For discussion and critique of Althusser’s influence on *Screen* and similar film theoretical positions of the 1970s, see Rodowick, *Crisis*, pp. 69-85; Philip Rosen, ‘*Screen* and 1970s Film Theory’, in Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (eds.), *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 270-273; and Andrew Britton, ‘The Ideology of *Screen*’, *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), pp. 384-393

forced to interrogate his own codes, his own method of interpretation, in the course of reading, and thus to produce fissures and gaps in the space of his own consciousness (fissures and gaps which exist in reality but which are repressed by an ideology, characteristic of bourgeois society, which insists on the “wholeness” and integrity of each individual consciousness). (*SM*, 139)<sup>51</sup>

This account seems to owe a significant debt to Althusser, who writes in ‘The “Piccolo Teatro”’ that ‘the play itself *is* the spectator’s consciousness – for the essential reason that the spectator has no other consciousness than the content which unites him to the play in advance, and the development of this content in the play itself’.<sup>52</sup> Yet Wollen does not develop this notion. A second idea is articulated in ‘Some Thoughts Arising’: ‘Modernism insists that we read a text – a work of art – because it is through art that we can perceive the hollow places in language and in ideology, the places where words ring false, where we can see what is not said, where there are rifts, ironies, or, as the logicians say, amphibologies’.<sup>53</sup> While the focus is again on gaps and contradiction, this time they are outside the subject’s consciousness.

With this second conception we can see how, as Rodowick aptly puts it, ‘the criterion of reflexivity renders semiological analysis and modernist aesthetic practice as functionally equivalent’.<sup>54</sup> If modernist texts are now understood as interrogations of their own codes, then they carry out the task done by criticism that seeks to bring to the surface a text’s ideological assumptions and contradictions. In a 1974 interview, Wollen described the alliance of semiotics and ideology critique:

Interviewers: Why is semiology the preferred study for those concerned with cinematic ideology, like the writers for *Cahiers du Cinéma*?

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<sup>51</sup> See Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 60

<sup>52</sup> Louis Althusser, ‘The “Piccolo Teatro”: Bertolazzi and Brecht’, *For Marx*, pp. 150-151

<sup>53</sup> Wollen, ‘Some Thoughts Arising’, p. 164

<sup>54</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 52

Wollen: Ideology isn't ideas poured into a mold. It isn't just "there" in a film. For *Cahiers*, it is impossible to understand ideology without understanding the mechanisms by which the meaning is generated. Semiology is precisely a study of how meanings are generated.<sup>55</sup>

The identity of modernist textual strategies and ideology critique in Wollen's account is visible if we examine two of the most famous examples of ideological analysis in film criticism. In 'John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln*' by the editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma* (for which Wollen wrote an afterword when it was translated in *Screen* in 1972),<sup>56</sup> the authors write that they aim to look at films in 'a process of active reading [...] to make them say what they have to say *within* what they leave unsaid, to reveal their constituent lacks',<sup>57</sup> a parallel with those 'hollow places in language and ideology' Wollen describes modernism revealing. Both, in fact, exemplify Althusser's notion of a 'symptomatic reading', a reading that 'divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads', that can 'identify the lacunae in the fullness of this discourse, the blanks in the crowded text'.<sup>58</sup>

Similar correlations can be found with Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', an earlier *Cahiers* editorial outlining the critical program that 'John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln*' undertakes. Comolli and Narboni set out a typology of seven types of film. *Young Mr Lincoln* falls into category (e), that of films that 'seem at first sight to be firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway', but whose apparent coherence is 'riddled with cracks', resulting in a film that undercuts its surface ideology.<sup>59</sup> Category (d) is, in a

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Structuralism implies a certain kind of methodology...', interview with Gerald Peary and Stuart Kaminsky, *Film Heritage* 9:4 (Fall 1974), p. 27

<sup>56</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Afterword', *Screen* 13:3 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 44-47.

<sup>57</sup> Editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 'John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln*', p. 8

<sup>58</sup> Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970), pp. 28 and 27

<sup>59</sup> Comolli and Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', pp. 32-33

sense, the inverse of this, corresponding to those films whose content is progressive, but whose retention of the dominant representational system sabotages their political aims.<sup>60</sup> In both of these categories, form and content undermine each other. As the editorial to the *Screen* issue that published ‘John Ford’s *Young Mr Lincoln*’ remarks,<sup>61</sup> the critical attempt by *Cahiers* to pull form and content apart and show their contradiction recalls Wollen’s claims that modernism sets form and content, language and thought, into conflict (‘[e]ach “betrays” the other’), and works in the friction between them (‘in the space of this mutual “betrayal” [...] art acts within the structured location of the sign itself’).<sup>62</sup> Modernist strategies, in Wollen’s argument, are artistic instantiations of the goals of radical semiotic criticism, a kind of ideology criticism-in-practice.

The equivalence for Wollen of modernism and radical theory is also indicated by the parallels with Althusser’s account of Marxism. Wollen repeatedly speaks of modernism as a ‘break’ (*SM*, 135).<sup>63</sup> Evidently, this is in part his taking up modernism’s self-characterisation as a rupture with the past, as in the Russian Futurists’ assertion that ‘[t]he past is too tight’.<sup>64</sup> However, it is also influenced by Althusser’s location of an ‘epistemological break’ in Marx’s writings of 1845.<sup>65</sup> This epistemological break departs from ideology to found a science,<sup>66</sup> one that is materialist rather than idealist.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Wollen writes that semiotics offers the

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<sup>60</sup> Comolli and Narboni, ‘Cinema/Ideology/Criticism’, p. 32

<sup>61</sup> ‘Editorial’, *Screen*, 13:3 (Autumn 1972), p. 3. No author is given but it was presumably written by Sam Rohdie

<sup>62</sup> Wollen, ‘Some Thoughts Arising’, p. 164

<sup>63</sup> See also Wollen, ‘Some Thoughts Arising’, p. 163

<sup>64</sup> David Burliuk, Alexander Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, ‘Slap in the Face of Public Taste’, trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, in Anna Lawton (ed.), *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912-1928* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 51

<sup>65</sup> Louis Althusser, ‘Introduction: Today’, *For Marx*, pp. 32-35. The Althusserian background of the term becomes explicit in ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’

<sup>66</sup> Althusser, ‘Introduction: Today’, p. 32

<sup>67</sup> See, for instance, ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’, pp. 161-218

possibility of ‘a *materialist* reading, based on a *scientific* aesthetic’,<sup>68</sup> while dismissing classical and romantic aesthetics as idealist,<sup>69</sup> and as ideologies.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, another concept that Althusser borrows, the notion of a ‘problematic’ – a structure of ideas and omissions existing as a unity, opening certain conceptual possibilities and foreclosing others – also appears in Wollen.<sup>71</sup> For what else are the categories of classicism, romanticism and modernism? Like Althusser’s problematics, each is defined primarily as a conceptual formation and is fully distinct from the others.

Wollen’s definition of modernism, then, is primarily ontological rather than historical. His periodisation is broad (with references to the Enlightenment and the period before the First World War); few artistic examples are given. Each category manifests limited internal heterogeneity and non-synchronicity (the continuation of older structures of thought in newer ones). Although it could be accommodated within those accounts of modernism that see its mainspring as a crisis in representation, there is no reference, for instance, to the significance for modernism of changing ideas of perception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, to the social and political ferment in which it was born, or indeed any location of sources for modernism outside of art and language.

Wollen’s primary aim, however, is not a detailed history of modernism. Instead, the semiotic reconceptualisation of modernism has another function: it

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<sup>68</sup> Wollen, ‘Some Thoughts Arising’, p. 165

<sup>69</sup> Wollen, ‘Some Thoughts Arising’, pp. 162-163

<sup>70</sup> Wollen, ‘Some Thoughts Arising’, p. 166

<sup>71</sup> Althusser, ‘Introduction: Today’, p. 32. Through Brewster, his colleague at *New Left Review* and *Screen*, Wollen had a strong link to Althusser’s thought. Brewster translated three of Althusser’s early books into English: *For Marx*, *Reading Capital* and *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, all in the years immediately preceding the 1972 Conclusion. Brewster was also editor of the English-language Althusserian journal *Theoretical Practice*, founded in 1971. For more evidence of the determining role of Althusser on Wollen’s thinking at this time, see Peter Wollen, ‘Contradiction’, *7 Days* 17 (23 February 1972), p. 19

opens the possibility of restarting the modernist project along the ‘proper’ theoretical lines, to make good its historical failure. The background to this is a resurgence of politically and aesthetically radical filmmaking. At the beginning of the 1972 Conclusion, Wollen writes that his 1969 book was the product of a ‘transitional period’ still ongoing as he writes three years on, defined by ‘the delayed encounter of the cinema with the “modern movement” in the arts’ (*SM*, 133). Cinema, he argues, still in its infancy in the avant-garde period preceding the First World War, did not feel the impact of Modernism until the 1920s, in the films of Eisenstein, most notably, as well as of Fernand Léger, Man Ray, and others. This initial impact, though, was shallow and soon negated by the rise of Nazism and socialist realism. But in the 1960s, two strands of filmmaking arose. First, the ‘underground’, particularly in the USA (Wollen does not name any directors, but we can suggest Andy Warhol, Ken Jacobs and Hollis Frampton, for instance); second, the French New Wave and its analogues developed into something that radically extended the limits of art cinema, in the work of Godard, Dusan Makavejev, Huillet and Straub, Chris Marker and Glauber Rocha (*SM*, 133-135). These two strands represent ‘the second wave of impact of the “modern movement” of the cinema’ (*SM*, 149).<sup>72</sup> As Rodowick notes, this stakes out territory charted in greater detail in 1975’s ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’.<sup>73</sup> At this point, past, present and future interweave in Wollen’s text: in the situation of 1972, filmmakers of the twenties such as Eisenstein and Vertov look contemporary, more recent ones dated (‘all the old landmarks are disappearing in the mists of time’) (*SM*, 134), while a revolutionary avant-garde

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<sup>72</sup> Others have proposed a similar argument. Alain Badiou, for instance, mentions Straub and Marguerite Duras in this connection and accords prime position to Godard. Alain Badiou, ‘Reference Points for Cinema’s Second Modernity’, *Cinema*, ed. Antoine de Baecque, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), pp. 58-63

<sup>73</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 47



future may be at hand: '[i]t is possible that the transitional period we have now entered could end with victories for the avant-garde that has emerged' (*SM*, 150), recalling the modernist ghosts rising for battle in 'Art in Revolution'. Wollen's writings of this period, especially 'Godard and Counter Cinema' and 'The Two Avant-Gardes', should be seen as interventions into film practice, attempts to provide theoretical guidance to this new modernist cinema in order to produce the revolutionary art for which the earlier modernists laid the groundwork; Mulvey and Wollen's films, meanwhile, are experiments at following this into film production.

The most advanced director of the new cinema, for Wollen, is Godard. Wollen characterises filmmakers such as Makavejev, Kluge, Rocha and others, as 'post-Godard directors', but notes that 'none of them have gone the whole way with him, and some have tended to retreat from the adventurousness of their own early "Godardian" work' (*SM*, 135). 'The Semiology of the Cinema' ended, as I have shown, with accolades for Godard. Wollen notes in the 1972 Conclusion that at that point the last Godard film he had seen was *Weekend* (released in France at the end of 1967). Since May 1968, he argues, Godard's work has 'increasingly been, so to speak, both politicised and semiologised' (*SM*, 134-135). Wollen no longer sees Godard's films as making use of all three dimensions of the cinematic sign, as understood through a Peircean semiotics of cinema. This, he suggests, is more characteristic of Makavejev's blend of library images, fictional narrative, documentary and so on. Instead, 'what concerned Godard was an interrogation of the cinema rather than a fulfilment of its potential' (*SM*, 135). Godard approaches a film as 'a text in which the problems of film-making [are] themselves raised' (*SM*, 142). Godard's work is crucial precisely because it seems to do exactly what

Wollen's analysis calls for: the conscious adoption of modernist strategies as semiotic techniques for the investigation of codes and therefore ideology.

In his discussion of Godard, Wollen begins to extrapolate his theory of counter cinema, given its full elucidation in 'Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est*' published the same year. The 1972 Conclusion brings into play some of the oppositions that give 'Godard and Counter Cinema' its structure. 'The text is thus no longer a transparent medium', Wollen writes, suggesting 'Transparency vs. Foregrounding' in 'Godard and Counter Cinema'; it 'is open rather than closed', anticipating the later binary of 'Closure v. aperture'; it 'is multiple rather than single', presaging the contrast of 'Single diegesis vs. Multiple diegesis' (*SM*, 140). Moreover, Wollen's definition of the modernist text as one that interrogates its codes means that all the avant-garde is absorbed into counter-cinema. For, according to Wollen, Hollywood 'provides the dominant codes by which films are read' (*SM*, 140). If modernist films interrogate these codes then they are in an oppositional relationship with Hollywood. Wollen's understanding of avant-garde forms as counters to Hollywood is conditioned by his background in the latter, his cinephile heritage – films displaying alternative characteristics are conceived as transgressions of the classical conventions he knows intimately. Wollen's argument here affirms something perceived by Jakobson, that avant-garde artworks, just as much as the most conservative productions, are understood against a background of artistic conventions that makes their innovations legible: '[t]he originality of the work finds itself restricted by the artistic code which dominates during a given epoch and in a given society. The artist's revolt, no less than his faithfulness to certain required rules, is conceived of by contemporaries with respect to the code that the innovator

wants to shatter'.<sup>74</sup> Yet I would argue that one should not assume that in experimental film the dominant codes are necessarily those of Hollywood rather than, say, modern and contemporary art; indeed, in the case of much avant-garde or artist filmmaking, there is a strong argument for suggesting the latter as a more relevant metric. Nevertheless, for Wollen, '[n]o theorist, no avant-garde director can simply turn their back on Hollywood. It is only in confrontation with Hollywood that anything new can be produced' (*SM*, 149). An understanding of Hollywood is necessary for the avant-garde: Wollen's (and Mulvey's) writings on classical Hollywood are therefore the research component of counter cinema, identifying the codes to be subverted; conversely, Mulvey and Wollen's future films are set in a privileged position, as they will have a direct and explicit relation to such researches. Hence, as well, the centrality of Godard for Wollen, who of all the second wave modernist directors is the most steeped in Hollywood (he started as a critic) and who carries this into his experimental practice.

### **'Godard and Counter Cinema'**

If 'Art in Revolution' is a sketch of a particular moment of politicised modernism (the Soviet avant-garde), and the 1972 Conclusion to *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* is a theoretical exposition of the relation of modernist strategies to ideology critique and an as yet inchoate counter-cinema, then 'Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est*', is a case study of the most advanced point of this nascent counter-cinema.<sup>75</sup> The essay was published in 1972 in *Afterimage*, a magazine in which the

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<sup>74</sup> Jakobson, 'A Glance at the Development of Semiotics', *Language in Literature*, p. 451

<sup>75</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est*', *Afterimage*, 4 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 6-16, republished as 'Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est*', *Readings and Writings*, pp. 79-91. Hereafter cited in text as 'GCC'. Page numbers refer to *Readings and Writings*

fields of experimental and leftist political cinema met, in an issue significantly titled 'For A New Cinema'.<sup>76</sup> 'Godard and Counter Cinema' is characterised by an extensive digestion and recombination of ideas, from *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Cinéthique* and French poststructuralist thought more generally, and from the earlier avant-garde art and theory of Brecht and Russian Formalism, much of which had recently been or was beginning to be translated into French and English. Much like Russian Formalism, Wollen's strategy is to uncover the structural levers of the film rather than remain at surface description, attending to its formal strategies and laying these out in a schematic manner with frequent examples (not always a feature of theoretically-literate writing on cinema at the time).<sup>77</sup> In this analysis, *Vent d'Est* (*Wind from the East/East Wind*, Dziga Vertov Group, 1969), appears as the furthest development of the revolutionary cinematic aesthetic Wollen advocates, reworking the objectives, concerns and strategies of the earlier political avant-garde in light of the advances in the analysis of textuality and signification made by more recent French thought.

'Godard and Counter Cinema' is both manifesto and critical study. I have already indicated how Mulvey's co-authored 'Women's Film Festival' essay had manifesto-like qualities, as does 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. 'Godard and Counter Cinema' displays such characteristics in its very structure – its arrangement into numbered oppositions, what Wollen calls the 'seven deadly sins' against the 'seven cardinal virtues':

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<sup>76</sup> Mulvey co-authored an article with the editors of *Afterimage* the same year. See Simon Field, Laura Mulvey and Peter Sainsbury, 'The Newsreel and Radical Film', *7 Days* 20 (15 March 1972), p. 18

<sup>77</sup> See the similar approach in Viktor Shklovsky, 'The Making of Don Quixote' and 'The Novel as Parody: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*', *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), pp. 72-100 and 147-170

Narrative transitivity	Narrative intransitivity
Identification	Estrangement
Transparency	Foregrounding
Single diegesis	Multiple diegesis
Closure	Aperture
Pleasure	Un-pleasure
Fiction	Reality

(‘GCC’, 79)

This list of things to be condemned and advocated recalls numerous manifestos. In the first issue of the Vorticist magazine *Blast*, edited by Wyndham Lewis, people, institutions and ideas are grouped under the disparaging or celebratory headings of ‘Blast’ or ‘Bless’.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, the 1960 Manifesto of the Situationist International counterposes what the group is against to what they propose to erect in its place. ‘Against the spectacle’, they declaim, ‘the realized situationist culture introduces total participation’.<sup>79</sup> Like these manifestos, ‘Godard and Counter Cinema’ exhibits the quality that Mary Ann Caws describes as ‘againstness’.<sup>80</sup> It attacks the tired and conservative, the ‘orthodox’, ‘old cinema’, the ‘Hollywood-Mosfilm’ axis, and offers something new, revolutionary and materialist (‘GCC’, 79). At times, a note-like writing style surfaces, in statements such as the following: ‘Transparency vs. foregrounding. (“Language wants to be overlooked – Siertsema v. making the mechanics of the film/text visible and explicit)’ (‘GCC’, 82). This abbreviation imparts a sense of urgency to the writing, much like a modernist manifesto (as Caws points out, the postmodernist manifesto tends to project a tone of ‘coolness’ rather than energy and excitability).<sup>81</sup> Wollen’s text shares with these precursors a future-

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<sup>78</sup> Wyndham Lewis (ed.), *Blast 1* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), pp. 11-28

<sup>79</sup> ‘Situationist Manifesto’, trans. Fabian Thompsett, online at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/manifesto.html> (accessed 25 September 2015). Originally published in *Internationale Situationniste* 4 (June 1960)

<sup>80</sup> Mary Ann Caws, ‘The Poetics of the Manifesto: Nowness and Newness’, in Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), p. xxiii

<sup>81</sup> Caws, ‘The Poetics of the Manifesto’, p. xxii

orientation, since, for Wollen, Godard's work 'is the starting-point for work on a revolutionary cinema. But it is not that revolutionary cinema itself' ('GCC', 91).

The manifesto form is conducive to persuasive rhetoric and excitement, but not especially to critical nuance. Binary structures do not suggest degrees of closure or aperture, pleasure or un-pleasure, and so on.<sup>82</sup> Many responses to Wollen's text have consequently found it easy to find counter-examples to Wollen's claims.<sup>83</sup> These criticisms should be offset by recognising the deliberately provocative, interventionist character of Wollen's text – it is not academic scholarship, but an attempt to lay a blueprint for a radically new film practice. Yet what is noteworthy is that 'Godard and Counter Cinema' interweaves a critical, analytical thread with its programmatic intervention. In contradistinction to most manifestos, Wollen is not explicitly writing about his own works or those of his close peers, although it may productively be read in relation to his and Mulvey's future films. Wollen criticises Godard on certain points, mainly Godard's rejection of the importance of fantasy and his crude understanding of the relationship between fiction and reality. *Vent d'Est* provides an opportunity to critically itemise the advances that have been made and where to now proceed, not a faultless exemplar of counter-cinema.

'Godard and Counter Cinema' suggests the influence of Godard's own tract 'What is to be done?'<sup>84</sup> published in issue one of *Afterimage*. Godard's text, with its

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<sup>82</sup> Brecht, whose influence I describe below, states that his two columns show 'changes of emphasis'; in contrast, Wollen describes the values of his two tables as 'counterposed' ('GCC', 79). See Bertolt Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 37

<sup>83</sup> Britton, for example, counters that the language of such classic authors Dickens, George Eliot and Henry James does not 'wish to be overlooked'. Simply because 'classic' texts do not exemplify the modernist tendency to overtly and frequently display their constructedness, Britton argues, does not mean that they pretend to be a perfectly transparent window and entirely efface their status as text. See Wollen's third opposition below. Andrew Britton, 'Living Historically: Two Films by Jean-Luc Godard', *Britton on Film*, p. 361

<sup>84</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, 'What is to be done?', trans. Mo Teitelbaum, *Afterimage*, 1 (April 1970), unpaginated

titular reference to Lenin, is like Wollen's numbered and dichotomous, beginning with Godard's much-repeated distinction between making political films and making films politically, and is hortatory, explicitly directing other filmmakers with its opening declaration 'We must'.<sup>85</sup> However, the most important predecessor to 'Godard and Counter Cinema', as Wollen later acknowledged, is Brecht's 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', his notes to the opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, which functions in part as a program for Brecht's theatrical practice, his 'modern' epic method.<sup>86</sup> Brecht presents dramatic and epic theatre in two columns:

DRAMATIC THEATRE	EPIC THEATRE
plot	narrative
implicates the spectator in a stage situation	turns the spectator into an observer but
wears down his capacity for action	arouses his capacity for action
provides him with sensations	forces him to take decisions
experience	picture of the world <sup>87</sup>

and so on. Brecht's list makes distinctions analogous to those found in 'Godard and Counter Cinema' – not limited to the second of Wollen's oppositions, between identification and estrangement. Brecht is mentioned by Wollen in two other sections, and hidden Brechtian traces can be detected elsewhere. Brecht is especially important for Wollen because his work combines modernism and revolutionary socialist politics, much like Eisenstein and Mayakovsky. Alan Lovell has proposed that the concept of 'counter-cinema', as theorised in the 1970s by Wollen and others,

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<sup>85</sup> Godard, 'What is to be done?', unpaginated

<sup>86</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Scenes of the Crime' (interview with Wanda Bershen), *Afterimage* 12:7 (February, 1985), p. 13. Others have noticed this connection. D. N. Rodowick suggests that epic theatre probably functioned as a model for Wollen's counter cinema in *Crisis*, p. 65. Similarly, Julia Lesage has linked Godard's strategies in *Vent d'Est* with Brecht's two lists in 'Godard-Gorin's *Wind from the East: Looking at Films Politically*', *Jump Cut* 4 (1974), online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC04folder/WindfromEast.html> (accessed 14 July 2015)

<sup>87</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', p. 37

is best understood as the merging of a certain conception of Brecht's epic theatre (a conception that sees Brecht as anti-realist),<sup>88</sup> with mid-twentieth-century 'open text' strategies, devices intended to defer meaning, produce indeterminacy, destabilise the narrator and so on.<sup>89</sup> Although there is much to be said for this argument, 'Godard and Counter Cinema' also draws frequently on Russian Formalism, while Wollen's evolving understanding of counter-cinema through the decade suggests a more complex position, as I argue in chapter four.

The first opposition in 'Godard and Counter Cinema', '[n]arrative transitivity' vs. 'narrative intransitivity', refers to the contrast in narrative construction between films in which elements follow each other according to a 'chain of causation', as against 'gaps and interruptions, episodic construction, undigested digression' ('GCC', 80). Such an interest in narrative indicates affinities with, and probably the direct influence of, structuralism and Russian Formalism. Indeed, the 1966 issue of *Communications* that included Metz's essay introducing the 'grande syntagmatique' was dedicated to the structural analysis of narrative.<sup>90</sup> Wollen's bibliography for the 1972 edition of *Signs and Meaning* lists Victor Erlich's study of Russian Formalism, Vladimir Propp's morphological study of Russian fairy tales and a collection of Russian Formalist writings in English (*SM*, 174-5).<sup>91</sup> 'Godard and Counter Cinema' shares with these a fascination with

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<sup>88</sup> This conception has frequently been the object of criticism. See, for instance, Dana Polan, 'Brecht and the politics of self-reflexive cinema', *Jump Cut* 17 (April 1978), online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC17folder/BrechtPolan.html> (accessed 8 January, 2018); and Sylvia Harvey, 'Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties', *Screen* 23:1 (May-June 1982), pp. 45-59

<sup>89</sup> Alan Lovell, 'Epic Theater and the Principles of Counter Cinema', *Jump Cut* 27 (July, 1982), online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC27folder/EpicThCounterCinema.html> (accessed 27 July, 2015); Alan Lovell, 'Epic Theater and Counter Cinema, Part 2', *Jump Cut* 28 (April, 1983), online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC28folder/EpicCounterCinema.html> (accessed July 28, 2015)

<sup>90</sup> *Communications* 8 (1966), subtitled 'Recherches sémiologiques: l'analyse structurale du récit'

<sup>91</sup> Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History – Doctrine* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1955); Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Louis A. Wagner, trans. Laurence



narrative mechanics. Wollen argues that through Godard's films of the 1960s, interpolations into the main body of the narrative grow until, in *Vent d'Est*, these digressions 'have hypertrophied until they dominate the film entirely' ('GCC', 80). The notion of interruption and digression as the film's dominant principles is remarkably similar to Shklovsky's interpretation of *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>92</sup> Wollen also directly echoes Propp's nomenclature when he speaks in 'Godard and Counter Cinema' of narrative *functions* ('GCC', 80).

A similar opposition is legible in Brecht's 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', which presented the principles of 'one scene makes another', 'growth', 'linear development', 'evolutionary determinism' on the side of dramatic or Aristotelian theatre, while placing 'each scene for itself', 'montage', 'in curves', 'jumps' on the side of epic theatre.<sup>93</sup> Brecht's plays make use of chapters and the picaresque form, narrational strategies that Wollen identifies in Godard ('GCC', 80). Godard, though, pushes his attack on narrative transitivity much further, as Wollen seems to recognise. Brecht favourably contrasted the epic 'narrative' with the dramatic 'plot'; in contrast, Godard rejects narrative *tout court*: in *Vent d'Est*, he 'has practically destroyed all narrative transitivity', through a 'constructive principle' that is 'rhetorical, rather than narrative, in the sense that it sets out the disposition of an argument, point by point, in a sequence of 1-7, which is then repeated, with a subsidiary sequence of Theory A and B' ('GCC', 80).

Wollen's second opposition, between identification and estrangement, is unmistakably derived from Brecht. But while Wollen states that '[i]t is hardly

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Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (eds.), *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965)

<sup>92</sup> Shklovsky, 'The Novel as Parody', pp. 147-170

<sup>93</sup> Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', p. 37

necessary, after Brecht, to comment on the purpose of [Godard's] estrangement effects' ('GCC', 82), a couple of remarks are needed. First, although Wollen doesn't state this, Godard's estrangement techniques are more extreme than Brecht's.<sup>94</sup> Brecht argued, for instance, that actors should not identify with but only 'quote' the characters they play, minimising the hypnotic effects of theatre.<sup>95</sup> In contrast, Godard's frequent and varied dis-identification strategies in *Vent d'Est* produce characters that are 'incoherent, fissured, interrupted, multiple and self-critical' ('GCC', 82), to such an extent that one may question whether this has the same effects. Second, there is a different emphasis in the conception of 'estrangement' held by Brecht and Wollen. For Brecht, the *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement-, alienation- or distanciation-effect) meant something that alienated social relations, making the audience re-perceive them as historical, changeable, and so on.<sup>96</sup> In Wollen's reading of *Vent d'Est*, however, estrangement does not produce deliberation with regard to social content, but raises a reflexive question with respect to the artwork itself: the audience ponders, '[w]hat is this film for?' ('GCC', 82). Though this perhaps raises the question of cinema's social function, the primary object of investigation here is the film, not any external subject matter. However, the political utility of estrangement as a filmic device beyond just artistic reflexivity is developed shortly after by Mulvey. Mulvey's account of the gendering of cinematic identification and its possible subversion through estrangement devices also has Brecht as a reference point, as I show in chapter three.

The category of transparency vs. foregrounding links directly to Wollen's arguments about the instrumental model of language's determining role in the

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<sup>94</sup> For a helpful account of the differences in usage of similar techniques in Brecht and Godard, see Lovell, 'Epic Theater and Counter Cinema, Part 2'

<sup>95</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting', *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 94

<sup>96</sup> See, for instance, Brecht, 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting', p. 98

historic conception of the relation of artistic form to content from the 1972 Conclusion to *Signs and Meaning*, which he recapitulates here. ‘After the Renaissance’, Wollen writes, ‘the iconographic imagery and ideographic space of pre-Renaissance painting were gradually rejected and replaced by the concept of pure representation. The “language” of painting became simply the instrument by which representation of the world was achieved’ (‘GCC’, 82). Dominant cinema is the heir to this Renaissance tradition. Wollen draws here on French film criticism, most notably ideas forwarded by Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean-Louis Comolli and Marcelin Pleynet, who attempted to extrapolate the ideological consequences of perspective and other elementary features of cinematic representation.<sup>97</sup> Baudry, for instance, argues that ‘concealment of the technical base will also bring about an inevitable ideological effect’.<sup>98</sup> Although Wollen doesn’t explicitly draw any political conclusions from the cinema apparatus in ‘Godard and Counter Cinema’, the 1972 Conclusion indicates that counter-cinema’s analysis and reworking of film’s representational processes is seen as tantamount to a critique of ideology.

The process of foregrounding, evidently a redeployment of Russian Formalism’s ‘laying bare the device’,<sup>99</sup> makes the means of representation available for such an analysis. As Wollen observes, Godard brings the cinema apparatus to visibility, for instance showing himself and the camera in *Far from Vietnam* (*Loin*

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<sup>97</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, ‘Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus’, trans. Alan Williams, in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Vol. II* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 531-542, originally ‘Effets idéologiques produits par l’appareil de base’, *Cinéthique*, 7-8 (1970), pp. 1-8; Jean-Louis Comolli, ‘Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field’, trans. Diana Matias, in Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Vol. II*, pp. 40-57, originally ‘Technique et Idéologie: Caméra, perspective, profondeur de champ’, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 229 (May-June 1971), pp. 4-21; Marcelin Pleynet, Jean Thibaudeau and Gérard Leblanc, ‘Economic-Ideological-Formal’, trans. Elias Noujaim, in Sylvia Harvey, *May ’68 and Film Culture* (London: BFI, 1980), p. 156, originally ‘Economique, idéologique, formel’, *Cinéthique* 3 (1969), pp. 7-14

<sup>98</sup> Baudry, ‘Ideological Effects’, pp. 533-534

<sup>99</sup> According to Erlich, the term was first used by Roman Jakobson and then picked up by others. Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, p. 77n44

*du Vietnam*, Joris Ivens, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, Agnès Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, 1967), and in *Vent d'Est* blocking representation by scratching the film, making the viewer aware of the usual function of the camera as a window onto events by hindering it ('GCC', 82-83). For Wollen, the scratched sequence (sometimes referred to as the 'workers' control' sequence) is an attempt to express 'negation', 'the founding principle of verbal language' ('GCC', 83). It is thus a crucial step in the 'project of writing in images' ('GCC', 84). According to Andrew Britton, this interpretation demonstrates Wollen's linguistic bias. To Britton, the view that writing in images is a valuable endeavour 'depends, obviously, on the assumption that "verbal language" is inherently superior to "other kinds of discourse," an assumption which depends in its turn on a supreme valuation of what one might describe crudely as "cognitive content" – verbal language is able to convey generalities and abstractions'.<sup>100</sup> Britton accurately connects this to Wollen's earlier remarks in *Signs and Meaning* regarding the necessity of for criticism of film's symbolic dimension, because it can carry conceptual content.<sup>101</sup> It is true that despite Wollen's criticism of Metz for his overvaluation of verbal language, Wollen himself falls into this trap at times, as I discuss in chapter four. However, it is not clear that this is happening in 'Godard and Counter Cinema', even if Wollen frequently translates his ideas into linguistic terminology. Instead, Wollen seems to be advocating the opening up of new terrain for cinema by developing its latent conceptual possibilities. Moreover, Britton's argument that there is no evidence for interpreting the scratching as a species of negation is open to objection.<sup>102</sup> As Julia Lesage has shown, the events depicted in

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<sup>100</sup> Britton, 'Living Historically', p. 359

<sup>101</sup> Britton, 'Living Historically', p. 360

<sup>102</sup> Britton, 'Living Historically', p. 360

this section relate to the abortive filmmaking collective that tried to make the film. By the time of editing, only Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin were left. The decision to scratch the film might be read, then, as an attempt by Godard and Gorin to negate an earlier failure.<sup>103</sup>

Wollen's fourth opposition, between single and multiple diegesis, is illustrated with reference to *Weekend*, in which figures from history such as Emily Bronte appear and interact with contemporary fictional characters, giving the impression of incommensurable worlds colliding ('GCC', 85). Wollen does not provide examples of this from *Vent d'Est* – unsurprisingly, since the film's characters and narrative are so skeletal that it is difficult to produce this sensation; the 'fiction has an attenuated, undeveloped quality' as Lovell puts it.<sup>104</sup> However, for Wollen, *Vent d'Est* and other post-1968 Godard films evince something related, the conflict between different codes and channels, a strategy he had propounded in the 1972 Conclusion when he wrote that 'I think codes should be confronted with each other, that films are texts which should be structured around contradictions of codes' (*SM*, 150). *Vent d'Est*, according to Wollen, clashes codes when it shows and rejects alternative filmmaking methods, as in the crossroads sequence with Glauber Rocha, while *Le Gai savoir* (1968) and *Pravda* (1969) make the 'rupture between soundtrack and images' dominant ('GCC', 85).<sup>105</sup> Wollen's privileged aesthetic here suggests the translation into semiotic terminology of Brecht's 'separation of

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<sup>103</sup> Lesage, 'Godard-Gorin's *Wind from the East*'

<sup>104</sup> See Lovell, 'Epic Theater and Counter Cinema, Part 2'

<sup>105</sup> Wollen's argument here is similar to one made by Bordwell, although in his characteristic nomenclature of cognitive psychology Bordwell speaks of Godard mixing contradictory 'cues' into single sequences, rather than the semiotic 'codes'. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 314-8.

elements' – the latter's assertion that '[w]ords, music and setting must become more independent of each other',<sup>106</sup> in opposition to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Wollen's binary of closure versus aperture refers to the contrast between '[a] self-contained object, harmonized within its own bounds' and 'open-endedness, overflow, intertextuality – allusion, quotation and parody' ('GCC', 85). The valorisation of aperture is close to Barthes's arguments (readerly texts, the bad object, are 'committed to the closure system of the West')<sup>107</sup> and Kristeva's exposition of intertextuality in her writings of the 1960s and 1970s, where she writes of 'a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another'.<sup>108</sup> Together, multiple diegesis and aperture mount a pincer attack on the traditional conception of the artwork as monad: one undermines its unity, by fragmenting it, breaking it down; the other undermines its closedness by attaching it to other texts (Rodowick calls this opening up the text 'centrifugally').<sup>109</sup> In this dual move we find correspondence with Metz's *Language and Cinema*: on the one hand, multiple codes co-exist in a single film; on the other, a single code can run across multiple films.<sup>110</sup> For Metz, however, this is a purely scientific description of cinema as a whole, rather than the basis of an aesthetic program.<sup>111</sup>

Whereas Kristeva argues that intertextuality opens the literary work up to the 'texts' of society and history, Wollen emphasises its corrosion of authorship.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', p. 38

<sup>107</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*, pp. 7-8

<sup>108</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Bounded Text', *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 36, originally 'Le texte clos', *Semiotikê: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969)

<sup>109</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 53

<sup>110</sup> Metz, *Language and Cinema*, p. 28-39

<sup>111</sup> Metz, *Language and Cinema*, p. 86 and 102

<sup>112</sup> Kristeva, 'Bounded Text', p. 37

Quotation, parody, and so on produce ‘a genuine polyphony, in which Godard’s own voice is drowned out and obliterated behind that of the authors quoted. The film can no longer be seen as a discourse with a single subject, the film maker/auteur’ (‘GCC’, 86). Wollen’s argument is one that others have made, most notably the notion of ‘The Author as Receiver’ proposed by Kaja Silverman, who speaks of the ‘authorial divestiture’ that is a continual objective of Godard’s cinematic practice.<sup>113</sup> While both Britton and David Bordwell are at pains to point out that authorship remains in the form of creative selection and combination of materials,<sup>114</sup> there is clearly a reconfiguration of the notion of the author, who can no longer be seen as the producer of discourse, but as its receiver and organiser. This idea is aptly described by Marc Karlin in relation to his own films when he speaks of ‘a kind of authorship, but there’s a whole host of “authors” ghosting you in front, behind and to the side of you’.<sup>115</sup>

In the late 1960s and early 1970s a tension is discernible in Godard’s work. On the one hand, Godard’s contributions to the *Cinétracts*, envisaged as anonymous agit-prop works in which directors put themselves at the service of activists during May ’68, evidence his non-disappearance as *auteur*, since Godard’s *Cinétracts* are immediately identifiable from his handwriting on intertitles and photographs, an authorial trace recognisable from earlier films. On the other, the collective production model of the Dziga Vertov Group marks a redoubling of Godard’s effort to undermine the traditional author.<sup>116</sup> It is curious that Wollen does not discuss this attempt at collective production (Wollen attributes *Vent d’Est* exclusively to

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<sup>113</sup> Kaja Silverman, ‘The Author as Receiver’, *October* 96 (Spring, 2001), pp. 20-21

<sup>114</sup> Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 332. Britton, ‘Living Historically’, p. 364

<sup>115</sup> Marc Karlin, ‘Problems of Independent Cinema’ (interview with Claire Johnston, Mark Nash and Paul Willemen), *Screen* 21:4 (Winter, 1980), p. 34

<sup>116</sup> Silverman, ‘Author as Receiver’, p. 21

Godard) nor even mention Godard's chief collaborator during this time, Jean-Pierre Gorin, with the paradoxical result of re-asserting the primacy of what Godard criticises as 'the auteur with a capital A'.<sup>117</sup> Wollen's conception of counter-cinema is still primarily formal, lacking the demand to revolutionise cinema's production relations made by Johnston, Mulvey and Myles in their Edinburgh Festival essay, and recapitulated in Johnston's 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema' the following year, through '[t]he development of collective work' via skill-sharing and non-hierarchical structures.<sup>118</sup>

According to Wollen, as a result of Godard's intertextual devices, '[t]he text can only be understood as an arena, a meeting-place in which different discourses encounter each other and struggle for supremacy' ('GCC', 87). Evidently, this is supposed to leave room for the viewer to participate in the work, as Wollen described the modernist work requiring in the 1972 Conclusion. However, as more than one critic has remarked, in Godard's 1968-1972 films there is frequently a clear demarcation of the 'correct' discourse, closing down the space for the viewer's activity. In one section of *Vent d'Est*, for instance, the voiceover makes statements, followed by the word 'consequence', followed by another statement, presenting a closed chain of reasoning that the audience is not invited to dispute. Britton, in fact, calls *Vent d'Est* 'one of the most repressive films ever made'.<sup>119</sup> Serge Daney emphasises the aptness of Godard's characterisation of these as 'blackboard films', since the filmmaker adopts the position of a teacher, drumming the Marxist lesson

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<sup>117</sup> Gideon Bachman, 'The Carrots are Cooked: A Conversation with Jean-Luc Godard', in David Sterritt (ed.), *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), p. 132, quoted in Silverman, 'Author as Receiver', p. 21

<sup>118</sup> Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Vol. 1. An Anthology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1976), p. 217. See also Claire Johnston, Laura Mulvey and Lynda Myles, 'Women's Film Festival', *26<sup>th</sup> Edinburgh Film Festival* (1972 programme), p. 7

<sup>119</sup> Britton, 'Living Historically', p. 356



into the pupil (the audience). Marxism has power over the teacher as well as the student, but this does not make the lesson less rigid.<sup>120</sup> Wollen himself acknowledges this to a certain degree, comparing Godard's relationship with the viewer to that of the flute player torturing his audience in *Vent d'Est* and noting that Godard's attempt to 'produce a collective working relationship between film maker and audience' consists to a large extent in an abusive practice of 'insults and interrogation' ('GCC', 88-89).

Both Britton and Lovell argue that the 'Second Female Voice' on the soundtrack is the dominant discourse of the film, an argument that accords with Daney's suggestion that in all Godard's films of this period the master discourse is spoken by a woman.<sup>121</sup> More broadly, the domination of the image track by speech is characteristic of the Dziga Vertov Group. While Wollen praises *Pravda* for its rupture of sound and image, in Godard's own text on the film he writes of '[o]ur duty as marxist-leninist filmmakers; to begin putting sounds which are correct onto images which are still false. The sounds are already correct because they come from revolutionary struggles. The images are still false because they are produced in the imperialist ideological camp'.<sup>122</sup> This hardly amounts to inviting the viewer to adjudicate between two equal, mutually critiquing discourses. As Daniel Fairfax notes, by the time of *Ici et ailleurs* (*Here and Elsewhere*, 1976), Godard would be engaged in an auto-critique of 'the deadening effects of a peremptory voiceover determining the manner in which the film's images should be interpreted by the

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<sup>120</sup> Serge Daney, 'Theorize/Terrorize: Godardian Pedagogy', trans. Annwyl Williams, in David Wilson (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma, Vol. 4: 1973-1978: History, Ideology, Cultural Struggle* (London and New York: Routledge/BFI, 2000), pp. 116 and 118

<sup>121</sup> Britton, 'Living Historically', p. 356; Lovell, 'Epic Theater and Counter Cinema, Part 2'; Daney, 'Theorize/Terrorize', p. 119.

<sup>122</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, 'Pravda', *Afterimage* 1, unpaginated

viewer'.<sup>123</sup> In summary, we can see that a work like *Vent d'Est* is defined not by sheer semiotic openness, as Wollen at times suggests, but by a tension between discursive multiplicity and a desire to communicate the correct political line, as Philip Rosen describes:

a certain troubling of signs and "normal" signifying procedures is combined with and even determined by more or less definitive discursive and political positions. It is simply inaccurate to use, say, *Wind from the East* and *Le Gai Saviour* as exemplifications of the deconstruction of positionality as such. It is fruitful to read these films as working on positionality; however, it is also relevant to note that one knows *where these films stand vis-à-vis* the socio-political formation.<sup>124</sup>

It is with regard to Wollen's sixth and seventh oppositions that his positions clearly diverge from Godard's. Wollen describes Godard's attempt to 'put the reality principle in command over the pleasure principle' as ascetic, puritanical and repressive ('GCC', 87), and mobilises Brecht in defence of pleasure ('GCC', 88). Yet the matter that really seems to interest Wollen is not so much pleasure as fantasy, to which he subtly shifts the discussion. For Wollen, fantasy is a necessary aspect of political cinema, to be articulated alongside theory and scientific analysis, rather than being antagonistic to them, echoing the valorisation of fantasy in Mulvey's contemporaneous texts.

The issue of fantasy is closely connected with the final opposition between fiction and reality, between '[a]ctors wearing make-up, acting a story' and 'real life, the breakdown of representation, truth' ('GCC', 89). As Wollen notes, Godard flattens distinct levels; for Godard, 'fiction = acting = lying = deception = representation = illusion = mystification = ideology' ('GCC', 90). Moreover,

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<sup>123</sup> Daniel Fairfax, 'From Film Criticism to Filmmaking: *La Cecilia* by Jean-Louis Comolli and *L'Olivier* by Jean Narboni et al', *Jump Cut* 57 (Fall, 2016), online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/-FairfaxLaCecelia/2.html> (accessed 9 November 2017)

<sup>124</sup> Philip Rosen, 'The Politics of the Sign and Film Theory', *October* 17 (Summer, 1981), p. 19

Godard's desire to find 'reality' is a futile endeavour – repeating his claim from the 1972 Conclusion, Wollen writes that '[t]he cinema cannot show the truth, or reveal it, because the truth is not out there in the real world, waiting to be photographed' ('GCC', 91). Instead, '[w]hat the cinema can do is produce meanings and meanings can only be plotted, not in relation to some abstract yardstick or criterion of truth, but in relation to other meanings'. The objective of counter-cinema is therefore not to oppose reality to fiction, but to 'struggle against the fantasies, ideologies and aesthetic devices of one cinema with its own fantasies, ideologies and aesthetic devices' ('GCC', 91), to develop an internal or immanent critique of cinema, countering fictions with other fictions, fantasies with other fantasies, meanings with other meanings, precisely because one cannot make films that critique cinema from outside, from a position exterior to signification.

If counter-cinema is concerned with meanings, and if Wollen understands Godard's films to bring the audience into the critical role of analysing the discourses that 'intermingle and quarrel' in them ('GCC', 87), why does Wollen not consider the political positions developed in *Vent d'Est*? *Vent d'Est* is hyper-politicised in its subject matter, its voiceover and iconography, a fact that must be as obvious to any viewer as its refusal of the cinematic conventions that Wollen details. In part, this seems to be a function of Wollen's disregard of extra-textual matters, since it is those essays that connect the film to its place and time of production that most adequately discuss *Vent d'Est*'s Maoist politics.<sup>125</sup> It is also due to the fact that the very formal strategies adopted by Godard undercut, at times, the film's function as a forum for political discussion. The extreme speed of the monologues, the

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<sup>125</sup> Lesage, 'Godard-Gorin's *Wind from the East*'; Lovell, 'Epic Theater and Counter Cinema, Part 2'. Daney, who participated in the same moment in French film culture that produced the Dziga Vertov Group's films, refers to 'the Chinese positions' of *Pravda* and *Vent d'Est* in 'Theorize/Terrorize', p. 118

overlapping voices and simultaneous presentation of written texts in *Vent d'Est* make it hard to discern and process the complex issues in question, as Lovell points out.<sup>126</sup> Overall, despite Wollen's evident interest in political subject matter, the role of such subject matter in radical cinema, and its relation to counter-cinematic forms, remains curiously under-theorised in 'Godard and Counter Cinema', as it was in the 1972 Conclusion. Still, it is the most extended set of clues as to what Mulvey and Wollen's films will be like. I turn now to the first of these.

### **'Scorched Earth', or Film as Ideology Critique: *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons***

*Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons* (1974), Mulvey and Wollen's first film, was the result of several factors. First, the material conditions for the film's production were provided by Wollen's job at Northwestern University, where he taught between 1972 and 1974 at the invitation of Paddy Whannel. The \$5000 cost of the film came from Wollen's salary, the equipment was borrowed from the university and the film crew composed of Wollen's students.<sup>127</sup> Second, Mulvey and Wollen desired to make a film 'without conventional editing'. This, Mulvey states, was an effect of their theoretical work: Wollen's on editing and point of view, and Mulvey's on identification and voyeurism, most notably in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which, although it had not yet been published, had been given as a paper in

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<sup>126</sup> Lovell, 'Epic Theater and Counter Cinema, Part 2'

<sup>127</sup> Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons' (interview with Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen), *Screen*, 15:3 (Autumn 1974), pp. 120-121, 123

an early draft in 1973.<sup>128</sup> Usefully, the ‘film without editing’ allowed for a very low shooting ratio, which made efficient use of Mulvey and Wollen’s limited resources.

With this as background, Heinrich von Kleist’s 1808 play of the same name provided the film’s initial point of orientation. In Kleist’s play, Greeks and Amazons are at war outside the gates of Troy. Penthesilea, the Amazon Queen, and Achilles, the Greek hero, fall in love on the field of battle. At the conclusion, Penthesilea kills Achilles, then commits suicide. As Mulvey observes, Kleist reversed the gender roles of the Penthesilea myth, which usually culminates in the phallic imagery of Achilles thrusting his spear into Penthesilea before falling in love with her.<sup>129</sup> The interest of Kleist’s *Penthesilea*, and the Amazon myth more generally, was the opportunity it provided to reflect psychoanalytically on sexual difference. Amazons represented precisely the enticing and dangerous, fetishistic figure that Mulvey had deconstructed as an expression of male fears and fantasies in ‘Mr Jones’.<sup>130</sup> As Mulvey says, ‘they carry spears and fight and ride horses, and have very phallic connotations. They appear like the idealised image a sexist society has of men/women – of phallic women’.<sup>131</sup> This also raised the question of the political utility of the Amazon myth for the women’s movement, which was ‘looking to the Amazons as one of the few myths of strong women that actually exist’.<sup>132</sup> Mulvey and Wollen’s film can be seen as an intervention in debates relating to works such as Monique Wittig’s *Les Guérillères* (1969, English translation 1971), which portrays an apocalyptic war against men, and Elizabeth Gould Davis’s anthropological *The First Sex* (1971), an attempt to show the matriarchal character of early human

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<sup>128</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 121

<sup>129</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 121

<sup>130</sup> This connection is also noted by Mulvey in ‘Introduction to the First Edition’, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. xxix

<sup>131</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 122

<sup>132</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 121

societies.<sup>133</sup> Finally, the Amazon myth enabled Mulvey and Wollen to track the vicissitudes of a single narrative: ‘we wanted to make a film about a story, rather than a film of a story, so it was an advantage that this was a story that had been told many times and had been changed radically by Kleist so that this other meaning came out’.<sup>134</sup> The fact that Leni Riefenstahl had sought to adapt Kleist’s play in the 1930s opened this history of a narrative’s transformations into the realm of cinema. Riefenstahl was, of course, an extremely problematic figure for feminists, at once the most famous female director in history and the most politically compromised (as well as in a sense incarnating the Amazon figure).<sup>135</sup> Kleist’s play, then, functioned as a nodal point from which to examine a number of interlocking, overdetermined concerns, stretching back to ancient mythology and into the present of the women’s movement.

As the opening credits declare, *Penthesilea* is ‘a film in five sequences’. Each ‘core of film’, as Wollen calls them in the lecture he gives to camera in section two, is composed of two long takes comprising almost an entire roll of 16mm film, laid end to end with a disguised edit to create the appearance of a single shot, the average length of which is around 18 minutes. The long take, associated through Bazin with a realist cinema aesthetic, is here pushed so far that a dialectical reversal takes place. In an essay of the following year that indicates his recognition, unlike in the 1969 edition of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, of the non-identity of indexicality and realism, Wollen ruminates on the use of the long take by

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<sup>133</sup> Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. David Le Vay (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); Elizabeth Gould Davis, *The First Sex* (New York: Putnam, 1971)

<sup>134</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 121

<sup>135</sup> Riefenstahl’s film *Das blaue Licht* was screened at the Edinburgh Women’s Film event in 1972. B. Ruby Rich recounts that the showing of Riefenstahl’s work at the 1974 Chicago Women’s Film Festival, which Mulvey helped to organise, was controversial. B. Ruby Rich, ‘Prologue. Angst and Joy on the Women’s Film Festival Circuit’, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 29-39

contemporary filmmakers in a way that gives us a picture of his and Mulvey's intentions:

clearly the sequence-shot has been used for purposes quite different from those foreseen by Bazin. Some of these filmmakers have stressed the autonomy of the camera and its own movement, rather than the primacy of the actors or the drama ([Miklós] Jancso, [Michael] Snow), others have used the sense of duration to de-realize the imaginary world of the film (Godard), others have been interested in duration as a formal feature in itself ([Andy] Warhol). Straub, probably the closest to Bazin in his insistence on authenticity, on a refusal of guidance for the spectator's eye, has nonetheless put his Bazinian style to purposes very different from those Bazin himself could have envisaged.<sup>136</sup>

'[F]ar from suppressing the filmmaking process', Wollen argues, 'the sequence shot tends to foreground it'.<sup>137</sup> Yet while Wollen explicitly describes the manner of construction of each film core in his lecture, and while the breaks *between* each of the five sequences are strongly emphasized – implying an aesthetic of demystification – the cut *within* each section is hidden. (The easiest of these hidden transitions to see is probably in sequence two, when the camera moves in very close to the wall by the mantelpiece.) These edits are reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), which Wollen later calls a 'great experimental film, still unsurpassed' and to which, he argues, *Penthesilea* is an homage.<sup>138</sup> Mulvey, meanwhile, suggests the influence of the final section of Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970), in which two 16mm rolls of film are connected with a disguised edit.<sup>139</sup> In short, there is a paradox at the film's centre – the intensification and highlighting of certain disjunctures and the stealthy suturing of others.

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<sup>136</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Introduction to *Citizen Kane*', *Readings and Writings*, p. 52

<sup>137</sup> Wollen, 'Introduction to *Citizen Kane*', p. 53

<sup>138</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Autobiographical Notes', 31 March 1994, Peter Wollen artist file, British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London, p. 12

<sup>139</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Unravelling the Puzzle' (interview with Lara Thompson), translated from *Do Utraty Wzroku (To Vision Loss)*, ed. Kamila Cuk and Lara Thompson (Kracow, Warsaw: Korporacja Halart, 2010), Laura Mulvey artist file, British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London, p. 6

*Penthesilea* takes its cues both from North American experimental films like *Zorns Lemma* and the European tradition emblematised most of all by Godard and Huillet and Straub.<sup>140</sup> In a 1974 *Screen* interview, Mulvey and Wollen also assert the importance of women filmmakers like Chantal Akerman, Joyce Wieland, Jackie Raynal and Yvonne Rainer.<sup>141</sup> The influence of Akerman's *Hotel Monterey* (1972) seems present in *Penthesilea*'s second section, in which the camera explores and maps out the space of the house in which Wollen delivers his lecture, tracing the outlines of arches and tables. The dislocation of text, speech and image in Rainer's *Lives of Performers* (1972) or their layering in a political context in Wieland's *Solidarity*, also seem to be echoed in *Penthesilea*. Mulvey saw all three films in the same season in 1973.<sup>142</sup>

According to Mulvey, *Penthesilea* 'is not graspable as a single, enclosed unit', but rather is 'multi-layered and disharmonic'.<sup>143</sup> Each core of film is preceded by a quotation on a title card, each has as its pro-filmic event a different representational medium,<sup>144</sup> and each, if we develop Mulvey and Wollen's remarks,<sup>145</sup> foregrounds certain filmic devices, producing a film made up of semi-autonomous segments, representable as follows:

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<sup>140</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 127

<sup>141</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', pp. 126-7

<sup>142</sup> Mulvey, 'Introduction to the Second Edition', *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. xvii

<sup>143</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 131

<sup>144</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 123

<sup>145</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', pp. 120, 123-4



	<b>Sequence 1</b>	<b>Sequence 2</b>	<b>Sequence 3</b>	<b>Sequence 4</b>	<b>Sequence 5</b>
<b>Quotation</b>	‘ Ghost white like a not yet written page’ – Mallarmé, ‘ Mimi que’	‘ The shadow sprinkled in black characters’ – Mallarmé, <i>Quant au Ivoire</i>	‘ Blazons of phobia, seals of self-punishment’ – Lacan, after Vico	‘ Net of light on overlight’ – H.D., ‘ Projector’	‘ Notes on the magic writing pad’ – Freud
<b>Medium of pro-filmic event</b>	Theatre	Verbal language	Plastic arts	Film	Video
<b>Subject matter of pro-filmic event</b>	Mime version of Kleist’s <i>Penthesilea</i>	Lecture by Wollen	Amazon representations in painting, sculpture, comics, etc.	Women’s suffrage in early twentieth century	Previous sections of film; <i>Penthesilea</i> actor speaking to camera
<b>Filmic devices</b>	Long shot, static camera	Handheld, mobile camera	Rostrum camera, wipes, intertitles	Superimposition	Zooms (aural and visual)

Presented like this, *Penthesilea* evokes Jakobson's claim that '[t]he poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination'.<sup>146</sup> According to Jakobson, language has two aspects. On the one hand, speakers *select* from a range of phonemic and lexical options at any given time. On the other, they *combine* the selected phonemes or words into larger units.<sup>147</sup> Saussure, as Jakobson observes, noted that the first (sometimes called 'paradigmatic') entailed reference to absent words, as use of one word suggests a range of semantically or morphologically associated or equivalent terms; the second (the 'syntagmatic') unites words in presence, in the same concrete utterance.<sup>148</sup> Like the poetry Jakobson cites as evidence, but in a more extreme, schematic manner, *Penthesilea* projects the first axis onto the second, as numerous paradigmatic options – filmic devices (static camera, long shot and rostrum camera, for example), artistic media (theatre, video, and so on) and points of entry to the subject (a staging of Kleist's play, a lecture, a slideshow of Amazon images) – are laid out one after another and tested. The whole then comprises a kind of lexicon of cinematic vocabulary or workbook of representational strategies.

In this light, we can see what Mulvey calls *Penthesilea*'s 'scorched earth'<sup>149</sup> policy not merely as an uncompromising refusal of visual pleasure and the snares of narrative, but as parallel to Godard's 'return to zero' with *Le Gai savoir* (*Joy of Learning*, 1969). Both seek to clear the cinematic field in order to inaugurate a new filmmaking project. Both are guided by the notion that verbal and cinematic

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<sup>146</sup> Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics', p. 71

<sup>147</sup> Roman Jakobson, 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances', *Language in Literature*, pp. 97-99

<sup>148</sup> Jakobson, 'Two Aspects of Language', p. 99. See also Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), pp. 58-59

<sup>149</sup> Mulvey, 'Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience', *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 170. The connection between the two films is also highlighted by Wollen in Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'Written Discussion', *Afterimage* 6 (Summer 1976), p. 36

language must be interrogated and begun afresh. *Le Gai savoir* continually circles around spelling, putting letters together with difficulty, attempting to understand how words operate. *Penthesilea*, similarly, is marked by the appearance and disappearance of speech and writing – muteness, attempts to speak, assured use of language. In this respect, *Penthesilea* reverses the trajectory of *Zorns Lemma*: where one of the crucial arcs of Mulvey and Wollen’s film is a passage towards language, specifically women’s language, Frampton’s film goes from sentences (read from the Bay State Primer), to disembodied single words in space, to their replacement with moving images.

*Penthesilea* also evinces five of the formal strategies Wollen enumerated for counter-cinema: the cores of film do not relate to one another transitively; the sequence shots militate against the production of identification with on-screen personages; the formal devices of the film are foregrounded; the film modules do not together compose a unitary world but multiple, heterogeneous diegeses; and the film continually opens outward to other texts and artworks. The last device is particularly marked: *Penthesilea* illustrates Wollen’s description of the modernist work as ‘centrifugal, throwing the reader out of the work to other works’ (*SM*, 140). Moreover, if the 1972 Conclusion to *Signs and Meaning* indicated that such strategies acted as a form of ideology criticism, bringing to attention and undermining the mechanisms by which cinematic meaning is produced, *Penthesilea* doubles this ideology criticism on the level of content, as the film takes apart the Amazon myth. There is an important distinction to draw between the task Mulvey and Wollen set themselves and those of certain authors they reference, such as J. J. Bachofen and Friedrich Engels,<sup>150</sup> who are interested in whether Amazons or

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<sup>150</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 122

matriarchal communities actually existed.<sup>151</sup> Mulvey and Wollen's concern is rather the significance of the myth's representations and reiterations, in images and oral and written retellings. Hence *Penthesilea* is constructed almost entirely from pre-existing artworks, like the films of Huillet and Straub, whom Mulvey and Wollen acknowledge as an influence.<sup>152</sup>

In a sense, the film echoes the History Group. Freud and Engels, both mentioned by Mulvey as History Group reading material, are implicitly or explicitly present in the film.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, *Penthesilea* – like the reading group – is a process of reading, questioning and critiquing from a feminist perspective, in which the viewer is invited to participate. The convergences and divergences with Godard are notable here. As Volker Pantenburg argues, *Penthesilea*'s context of production suggests a 'university discourse', a pedagogical emphasis emblematised most of all in the second sequence, in which Wollen delivers a lecture.<sup>154</sup> Yet *Penthesilea* has a questioning form and measured pace that asks for the viewer's contribution to this learning, far from the stern didacticism and rapidity of the blackboard films of Godard/the Dziga Vertov Group. Moreover, the intertextuality of *Penthesilea* is distinct from Godard's. Jacques Rivette remarks that 'the important point in the sequence of Jean-Luc's films came when he began removing the quotation marks and the names of the authors, thus not wanting to be the author of his scripts and wanting these texts coming from all over the place to lose their authorship'.<sup>155</sup> In

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<sup>151</sup> J. J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J. J. Bachofen*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 73 and 162; Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 39 and 42

<sup>152</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 126

<sup>153</sup> Both are mentioned by Mulvey and Wollen in 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 122

<sup>154</sup> Volker Pantenburg, 'The Third Avant-Garde: Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen, and the Theory-Film', lecture given at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 14 May 2016

<sup>155</sup> Bernard Eisenschitz, Jean-André Fieschi and Eduardo de Gregorio, 'Interview with Jacques Rivette', trans. Tom Milne, in Jonathan Rosenbaum (ed.), *Jacques Rivette: Texts and Interviews* (London: BFI, 1977), p. 51

*Penthesilea*, however, quotations and allusions are carefully placed and referenced, their point of origin marked, suggesting an academic essay as much as artistic montage. (Wollen originally wanted to include a bibliography in the film.)<sup>156</sup>

In writings and interviews surrounding *Penthesilea*, Mulvey and Wollen introduce a new concept, ‘theory film’ or ‘theoretical film’, a term applicable to *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *AMY!* as well as *Penthesilea*.<sup>157</sup> Wollen defines this, first of all, as one of three sub-categories of political film, the others being agitation and propaganda. The agitation film is ‘for a specific conjuncture and for a specific limited audience’,<sup>158</sup> in the sense of a film arising from and intervening in a specific struggle (like London Women’s Film Group’s 1972 *Fakenham Film*, for instance). The propaganda film, meanwhile, is ‘aimed at a mass and presents a general kind of political line and broad ideas’<sup>159</sup> (we might think of Eisenstein’s early films). The theoretical film is, like the agitation film, for a specific conjuncture and limited audience, but a theoretical conjuncture and a ‘cadre’ audience.<sup>160</sup> It raises questions, debates and problems of political theory. As Pantenburg shows in his study of the ‘film as theory’ of Godard and Harun Farocki, the theory film does not merely entail the insertion of conceptual discourse into film via verbal language, but the elaboration of a theoretical discourse with specifically cinematic means, through the organisation of images and sounds.<sup>161</sup> Eisenstein’s intellectual montage looms large over this mode of filmmaking, hence the importance of Wollen’s earlier studies of the Soviet director for their own ‘montage film’ (Wollen’s term for *Penthesilea* in

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<sup>156</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 130

<sup>157</sup> See Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 131; Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Written Discussion’, p. 33

<sup>158</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 131

<sup>159</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 131

<sup>160</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 131

<sup>161</sup> Volker Pantenburg, *Farocki/Godard: Film as Theory*, trans. Michael Turnbull (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), pp. 144-147

his lecture). Mulvey and Wollen's first three films can be understood as attempts to develop Eisenstein's concept by exploring a wider range of strategies.

According to Mulvey, theory films must take their representational strategies as objects of investigation: '[y]ou can't imagine theoretical films which don't make their own formal structure an object of investigation'.<sup>162</sup> To raise problems of political theory *with* film is necessarily to bring up the issue of *how* film can work politically. As Pantenburg argues in relation to Farocki and Godard, a privileged device for producing reflexivity is the consideration of other art forms, 'thematizing a medium' through 'its diegetic confrontation with another medium',<sup>163</sup> a procedure that is centred in all of Mulvey and Wollen's films but especially in *Penthesilea*, in which each section has a distinct component of representational mediation through taking as its pro-filmic event another artistic medium, as I indicated above. Through this and other reflexive techniques the aesthetic theory Wollen argued in the 1972 Conclusion was necessary for guiding a radical modernist cinema is integrated into Mulvey and Wollen's films. In Jakobson's terminology what we have is the interplay of poetic and metalingual functions. Discussing his communication model (reproduced in this chapter, above), Jakobson argues that a message whose orientation is towards the message itself (that is centrally concerned with its own status as language or artwork) is one in which the poetic function is dominant. A message whose orientation is primarily towards the general code by which messages have meaning (as in linguistics and, crucially, film theory, which attempts to identify and classify the basic codes of cinema) is one in which the 'metalingual' function dominates.<sup>164</sup> These two functions – the others described by Jakobson need not

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<sup>162</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Written Discussion', p. 33

<sup>163</sup> Pantenburg, *Farocki/Godard*, p. 73

<sup>164</sup> Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics', p. 69

concern us – are closely related: they are in an inverse relationship, Jakobson claims.<sup>165</sup> *Penthesilea*, I suggest, is characterised by the co-dominance of poetic and metalingual functions,<sup>166</sup> as discourse *about* film sits in a film, just as Barthes argues that Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry is characterised by the presence ‘in one and the same written matter, [of] literature and the theory of literature’.<sup>167</sup>

Sequence one of *Penthesilea* opens with an intertitle displaying a Mallarmé quotation: ‘Ghost white like a not yet written page’. In the first instance, this quotation from ‘Mimique’ (‘Mime’) refers to the fact that the sequence is a mimed, compressed version of Kleist’s play, recalling Huillet and Straub’s eleven minute reduction of Ferdinand Bruckner’s *Pains of Youth* in *The Bridegroom, the Comedienne and the Pimp* (*Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter*, 1968). The mime functions as a map for what follows, presenting the play in abridged form, setting out the topics for discussion.<sup>168</sup> The quotation introduces the theme of language and its absence: the not yet written page is the film itself, which in this first section suppresses language; a paradoxical intertitle, since language announces its own suppression. By removing linguistic specificity through mime, the play is returned to myth, a realm of narratives independent of particular verbal iterations. Meanwhile, the deliberate primitivism of the static camera and long shot,

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<sup>165</sup> Jakobson, ‘Linguistics and Poetics’, p. 71

<sup>166</sup> I have left to one side the essay film. As Pantenburg points out, much writing on the essay film has a problematic generic conception of the essay film, frequently proposing the extensive use of voiceover or text as defining stylistic features, which is quite different from the non-generic notion of ‘theoretical’ film as cinema that articulates a conceptual discourse through an open set of means not decided in advance. Moreover, just as Pantenburg notes that the stress on authorship, subjectivity and the personal in much scholarly discussion of the essay film makes it distant from the work of Farocki and Godard, the same applies to Mulvey and Wollen, who are inimical to traditional conceptions of authorship as self-expression and favour the impersonal discourse of theory. Pantenburg, *Farocki/Godard*, pp. 142-147

<sup>167</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘Literature and Metalanguage’, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 97-98

<sup>168</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 127

and the theatrical pro-filmic event, evoke early cinema, situating the sequence not only before verbal language but before the classical language of cinema (fig. 1).

In the second sequence, Wollen gives a lecture while wandering around an empty house (fig. 2). The entry of language is announced in the reference to '[t]he shadow sprinkled in black characters' in the introductory intertitle. The lecture braids together description of the film's own structure, biographical information about Kleist, psychoanalytic speculation about his life and the play, the attempted adaptation by Leni Riefenstahl, a broader mythography of the Amazons (through quotations from Propertius, Quintus Smyrnaeus and others) and discussion of the Amazon figure's relevance to feminism. Wollen calls this speech 'a palimpsest as well as a maze', one that 'duplicates the structure of the film as a whole', with 'stories embedded and layered within it'.<sup>169</sup> The lecture encapsulates much of the argument discernible in the rest of the film. In Kleist's play *Penthesilea* betrays her comrades, rejecting female community for the ideal of the superwoman. Amazon society is portrayed as exceptional in relation to women – they are 'impossible to emulate except in fantasy'. 'Their weapons and strategy', Wollen summarises, 'are men's weapons and strategy. They offer an alternative which is magical, not political.' The contradictions the myth expresses, about sexual difference and patriarchy, must be resolved in reality, but understanding the contradictions of the myth can open a space for thinking the political action that could abolish them. 'If we can understand it', Wollen says, 'retelling it with its gaps and its spaces, absences as well as presences, then perhaps one day we will be able to end it in history, rather than in words, or images'.

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<sup>169</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Written Discussion', p. 38



In delivering the lecture, Wollen is first a representative of the filmmakers. Yet Wollen's appearance here should not be understood as the stamp of the classical author as source of meaning, given Mulvey and Wollen's antipathy to this notion. Instead, it marks the film as, in Émile Benveniste's terminology, 'discourse' rather than 'history'<sup>170</sup> – it acknowledges itself as enunciated from a particular place at a particular time, etching the point of production into the artwork, rather than effacing it. In making the filmmakers' argument explicit, it becomes available for the viewer to grasp, analyse and dispute. Second, Wollen incarnates the male intellectual, confident in his speech and knowledge (although articulating feminist concerns, he does so from a distanced, disinterested standpoint, avoiding the first person). However, the sequence takes care to undercut the power of the author and the male intellectual. In contrast to narrative and documentary cinema's convention of allowing action to lead camera movement and editing, the camera extricates itself from Wollen's path, exploring the house on its own as well as sometimes circling back to the filmmaker. It examines the walls, rug, mantelpiece, follows the outlines of arches or the circumference of a table (fig. 3). It seems to stumble upon a series of handwritten cue cards, which it zooms in on and allows the viewer to read (fig. 4). The camera gives the impression of being a consciousness of its own, most noticeably in its double-takes, when it looks at an object or feature, looks away, only to turn back and examine again in closer detail. Despite this appearance of consciousness, the camerawork is highly choreographed (Mulvey and Wollen had the sequence reshot because the original camera operator did not film according to their plan).<sup>171</sup> The sequence therefore uses a technique associated with *cinéma vérité*

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<sup>170</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 206-209

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 15 September 2015

– a handheld camera *apparently* following whatever seems to be interesting at any one time – while in fact rejecting *cinema vérité*'s spontaneist ideology, the notion that one may simply arrive and adequately pick out reality with a camera, a position I have indicated Wollen was implacably hostile to.<sup>172</sup> Instead, as Johnston and Willemen observe in their interview with the filmmakers, this is a *camera stylo*, the camera as a pen writing a text.<sup>173</sup> Wollen's meandering walk, meanwhile, serves as a visual echo of his labyrinthine, circling speech.

The aim of such elaborate cinematographic writing is, in Mulvey's words, to produce 'a contrary and interlocked discourse, negating or undercutting the verbal one'.<sup>174</sup> This is extended in the handwritten cue cards, which function as a kind of sub-discourse embedded in the discourse of the camera. As Pantenburg observes, there are therefore three interweaved discourses in this section: speech, writing and the camera.<sup>175</sup> The cards, recalling the letter in Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (1962) or the militant's text in the Dziga Vertov Group's *Luttes en Italie* (1969), fall into several categories: several show words already spoken, reiterating or allowing further reflection; one presents a passage that never appears in Wollen's lecture; two are too overexposed to read; and one carries the text being spoken by Wollen on the soundtrack at the same time, in a sudden and momentary syncing. Since Wollen's voice can be heard on the audio track without any reduction in volume, and since it is almost impossible to read the cue cards and listen to the lecture at the same time, speech and text battle each other and the viewer must choose on which to

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<sup>172</sup> 'We did not want there to be any access to the truth', Wollen says of this camerawork. Mulvey and Wollen, 'Written Discussion', p. 38

<sup>173</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 124

<sup>174</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Written Discussion', p. 38

<sup>175</sup> Pantenburg, 'The Third Avant-Garde'

concentrate.<sup>176</sup> (Again, there is a similarity here with *Luttes en Italie*, which by sometimes simultaneously playing both French and Italian voiceovers cancels them out.) The cards undermine the authority of the embodied, speaking voice. With their underlinings and multiple colours they suggest other systems of signification. The effect of these devices is not to obliterate the lecture but to create a critical distance, preventing the author or male intellectual from dictating the sense of the film.<sup>177</sup>

The third sequence opens with a quotation from Lacan: ‘Blazons of phobia, seals of self-punishment’. In the passage of ‘The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’ that these phrases are taken from, Lacan goes on to say that these blazons and seals ‘are the hermetic elements that our exegesis dissolves’;<sup>178</sup> earlier, too, he has stated that while the unconscious is the ‘censored chapter’ of the subject’s history, this history has ‘been written down elsewhere’, including in traditions and legends.<sup>179</sup> The quotation, then, articulates the overarching aim of this section, which reads a series of signs, symptoms – representations of Amazons in sculpture, painting, bas-relief, comic strips – for their psychoanalytic meaning. If I have already asserted that *Penthesilea* as a whole attempts a much expanded intellectual montage, then this sequence, with its mythological figures de-diegeticised by being set against an empty background, recalls in miniature Eisenstein’s prime example of his concept, *October*’s ‘Gods sequence’ (figs. 7-13).<sup>180</sup> The order of images here articulates an argument, but a subtle one, lacking the overt didacticism of Eisenstein. ‘Unless you know a terrific

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<sup>176</sup> Mulvey: ‘you have the spoken word and the written word coinciding and acting against each other, blocking each other out at times’. Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 128

<sup>177</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Written Discussion’, p. 38

<sup>178</sup> Jacques Lacan, ‘The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 232

<sup>179</sup> Lacan, ‘Function and Field’, p. 215

<sup>180</sup> For Eisenstein’s use of non-diegetic inserts, see David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), p. 44

amount about the ancient Amazon legends’, Mulvey admits, ‘it is difficult to see precisely what the order of the pictures means. But there is a very definite system and structure in the arrangement of those images.’<sup>181</sup>

It is worth trying to reconstruct this system. First, the artworks are arranged roughly chronologically, beginning with ancient Greece and ending with the most recent image, from a 1972 Wonder Woman comic. Second, there are three narratives, each structured around a venerated Greek hero, who conquers the Amazons in war and sex: Heracles, who takes the girdle of the Amazon queen Hippolyta or Andromache as his Ninth Labour; Theseus, who seduces or rapes the Amazon queen (normally Antiope) and brings her back to Athens, the Amazons following the Greeks to Athens only to be resoundingly defeated; and Achilles, who kills the Amazon queen Penthesilea on the battlefield and then falls in love with her, either as he thrusts in his weapon or after she is dead when he removes her helmet and sees her face. As Mulvey states in an interview, each of these has different ideological overtones. The Theseus variant in particular gestures to the link between patriarchy and the Athenian state, since it identifies the vanquishing of an army of women with the establishment of Athens (Theseus being the mythical founder of Athens). In this respect it is similar to Bachofen’s argument that civilisation is necessarily founded on the overcoming of the feminine principle, of ‘primitive’ matriarchy, of which Amazonism is the most extreme example.<sup>182</sup> In both, the story is not about strong women but their necessary exclusion from the order of civilisation.

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<sup>181</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 125

<sup>182</sup> Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right*, pp. 77, 100, 105, 162, 171. See also Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’, p. 122

As well as its attention to the changing nature of the myth, the sequence emphasises the repetition of motifs, such as the single bared breast or the girdle. The intertitles reiterate the myth's continual return to the same themes. There are two consistent trends: Amazons as defeated foes, and as Other to the Greeks. The intertitles point to 'Wounded Amazons', and of how 'Heracles kills the Amazon Queen', 'Theseus abducts the Amazon Queen', 'Achilles kills Penthesilea'. Images illustrate the pattern of Greek warriors standing above a fallen Amazon in battle, or in the process of bringing her down to the ground. While powerful and dangerous, the Amazons are always ultimately defeated at the hands of the Greeks. In these respects the argument proposed in *Penthesilea* is the same as feminist accounts of the Amazon myth given by Abby Wetan Kleinbaum and Mandy Merck.<sup>183</sup> The Amazons are 'vanquished opponents of heroes credited with the establishment of the Athenian state'.<sup>184</sup>

This argument would have been clearer if Mulvey and Wollen had included, as originally intended, a voiceover discussing Bachofen and the different myth variants.<sup>185</sup> Instead, the audio track is occupied by Luciano Berio's 1961 composition 'Visage', performed by Cathy Berberian. Rather than a spoken analytic discourse, this dramatises the beginnings of speech,<sup>186</sup> the first attempt at female speech in the film. The wipes that link the images, meanwhile, are a harbinger of the fifth sequence's citation of Freud's 'mystic writing pad', its metaphor of the 'wiping

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<sup>183</sup> Mandy Merck, 'The City's Achievements', in Susan Lipshitz (ed.), *Tearing the Veil: Essays on Femininity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), reprinted as 'The Amazons of Ancient Athens', *Perversions: Deviant Readings* (London: Virago, 1993), pp. 121-161; Abby Wetan Kleinbaum, *The War Against the Amazons* (New York: New Press, 1983), p. 11

<sup>184</sup> Merck, 'Amazons of Ancient Athens', p. 123

<sup>185</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 126

<sup>186</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 120. Later, Wollen argues that the soundtrack functions as a 'semiotic chora' as defined by Kristeva. 'Written Discussion', p. 37

away' of the pad and the residual imprint underneath. The images of the Amazons are rubbed out and redrawn, yet leave an invisible imprint, a palimpsest.

As Mary Kelly notes, the images from the second Wonder Woman comic that conclude sequence five are crucial, moving the film out of myth and into history and politics.<sup>187</sup> In this issue of the comic, Wonder Woman has lost her magical powers and becomes involved in a women's labour dispute, shifting from an exceptional individual to a participant in collective struggle. The fourth sequence consolidates this shift from myth into history and from superwomen to female collectivity. The sequence shows part of a 1913 film about women's suffrage in Britain, including an appearance by Emmeline Pankhurst. Over this is superimposed footage of a woman (Grace McKeaney) reading, in 1974, texts by the US socialist feminist Jessie Ashley published in 1911-12.<sup>188</sup> This footage is the inverse of the suffragette film in a number of ways: it is in colour, has sync sound, and relates to the United States. The quotation 'Net of light on overlight' from H.D. refers first of all to this superimposition. H.D. is a significant citation in other respects: as a poet she is a woman who manipulates language; she regularly drew on ancient myth in her poetry; she was analysed by Freud in the 1930s; and as a North American who moved to London, she connects the US and UK, overlain in this section. 'Projector II', the poem from which the quotation comes, was published in the film magazine *Close Up* in 1927;<sup>189</sup> its appearance there brings in the submerged history of cinematic modernism. Whether an intended reference or not, 1927 was also the year of *The Jazz Singer* (directed by Alan Crosland), the first feature film with sync sound, perhaps a significant fact given that part four adds speech to a silent film.

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<sup>187</sup> Mary Kelly, 'Penthesilea', *Spare Rib* 30 (November 1974), p. 40

<sup>188</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 133

<sup>189</sup> H.D., 'Projector II', *Close Up* (October, 1927), pp. 35-44

The performance of Ashley's words to camera in a certain sense parallels Wollen's lecture in part two, yet where the latter was a fluent negotiation of more than two millennia of texts and history, the former is an admission of difficulties. The primary problem is the intersection of sexual and class politics. At the end, unable to be heard by working-class women or find approval among middle-class feminists, Ashley falls silent. For Mulvey, this difficulty in communicating with working-class women is linguistic, since Ashley can only speak in her own language, that of the bourgeoisie.<sup>190</sup> Yet the silence at the end is not a failure, returning in a simple circle to the pre-linguistic sequences earlier in the film. Rather, it is a temporary blockage, 'the sound of a pause' – Ashley has 'identified and diagnosed' a contradiction which cannot be resolved alone, but might yet be soluble.<sup>191</sup> The figure of superimposition central to this sequence enacts the very content of Ashley's writings. Just as she juxtaposes socialism and feminism but is unable to reconcile them, so the act of superimposition layers two images onto each other without their unification. During breaks in Ashley's text the soundtrack is occupied by the sounds of machinery and the indistinct murmur of female-sounding voices. As Kelly argues, we can see the machinic sounds here as an allusion to the projector.<sup>192</sup> But one can also read the sounds of machinery as the appearance in the film of heavy industry and the murmur of voices as the sound of labour. A female class collectivity in reality, not myth.

In part five, the previous four sequences are played back on video monitors stacked to make a square, with the camera zooming in and out of different monitors

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<sup>190</sup> Patricia Erens, 'Penthesilea', *Wide Angle*, 2:3 (1978), p. 34; Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 133

<sup>191</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Written Discussion', p. 38

<sup>192</sup> Kelly, 'Penthesilea', p. 63

and the different audio tracks moving up and down in the sound mix (fig. 14).<sup>193</sup> The sequence adds another layer of representational reflexivity to the film, as earlier sections of the film become subject matter, in an ‘electronic laboratory, where the film segments are made available for further research’, as Pantenburg describes it.<sup>194</sup> In the layout of the monitors, there is a spatialisation of what was previously temporal, the ordered chain of the film, making simultaneous what was sequential (in an astute metaphor, Pantenburg describes this move from the ‘sequential’ to the ‘diagrammatical’ as akin to spreading out sheets of paper on a desk to get a feel for their overall nature).<sup>195</sup> New connections between elements can emerge. The camera can show all four sequences at the same time (montage in a single shot), zoom in to review certain sections, or bring a channel of sound from one part of the film and lay it over the image of another.

The intertitle preceding this final sequence mentions Freud’s ‘Mystic Writing-Pad’. In a 1925 essay, Freud describes a ‘small contrivance’ in his possession: a pad composed of a wax tablet with a sheet of translucent paper and a further piece of transparent celluloid on top. The celluloid sheet allows for writing with a stylus, which can be instantly erased, but Freud notes that if one lifts the sheets to view the wax, previous layers of writing are visible like a palimpsest. For Freud, this is analogous to the mental apparatus, with the surface sheets of paper representing the perception-consciousness that continuously takes in new stimuli and the wax tablet standing in for the memory systems that store permanent traces.<sup>196</sup> Throughout

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<sup>193</sup> When the film was made, Mulvey and Wollen were unaware of Nam June Paik’s installations of stacked monitors, although Mulvey suggests that Larry Sider, who arranged the video monitors, may have known his work. Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 20 November 2015

<sup>194</sup> Pantenburg, ‘The Third Avant-Garde’

<sup>195</sup> Pantenburg, ‘The Third Avant-Garde’

<sup>196</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘A Note Upon the “Mystic Writing Pad”’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIX (1923-1925)*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961), pp. 227-232. In *Penthesilea* the title is translated as ‘Notes on the magic writing pad’



*Penthesilea*, the motif of the palimpsest has proposed a complicated homology between myth, mind and the film's form. The superimposition in the film's fourth sequence, for instance, recalls Wollen's description of Huillet and Straub in 1975's 'The Two Avant-Gardes', his statement that their films 'are almost all "layered" like a palimpsest – in this case, the space between texts is not only semantic but historical too, the different textual strata being the residues of different epochs and cultures' ('TAG', 102). More generally, the film functions by what Mulvey terms an 'accumulation of elements', a process of accretion rather than progression.<sup>197</sup> The Amazon myth, meanwhile, is a 'tortuous palimpsest', as Wollen calls it in his lecture, continually rewritten to suit its historical moment, each time adding a new layer without erasing the previous ones. Finally, the palimpsest is a metaphor employed by both Freud and Lacan. The latter states that the act of reading the blazons of phobia and seals of self-punishment is 'the revelation of the palimpsest'.<sup>198</sup> Freud connects ancient civilisation and the mind through the same figure: the identification of the pre-Oedipal phase in girls is likened to the Minoan-Mycenaean civilisation that Greek civilisation was founded on.<sup>199</sup> *Penthesilea* condenses these different levels into one through the palimpsest figure.

Mulvey and Wollen speak of being interested in the connection between Freud's mystic writing-pad (*Wunderblock*) and 'the notion of video as a system of perception and memory'. The video sequence acts as a memory of the rest of the film.<sup>200</sup> Almost immediately, however, the screens show previously unseen angles on the mime. In this new footage, the camera follows the actor who plays

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<sup>197</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 128

<sup>198</sup> Lacan, 'Function and Field', p. 232

<sup>199</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Female Sexuality', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XXI (1927-1931)*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961), p. 226

<sup>200</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', p. 129

Penthesilea (Debra Dolnansky) to a dressing room, where she removes her make-up and addresses a short monologue to the camera. By the end of the sequence, all four monitors show this footage, and Dolnansky's voice can be heard on the audio-track. For Patricia Erens, this is 'rupturing the cycle', breaking out of the circularity implied by the end of section four, which by ending in silence could be understood as returning to the beginning of the film.<sup>201</sup> In the Freudian metaphor of the writing pad, what appears here is the making of new memory.

'Women looked at each other through the eyes of men. Women spoke to each other through the words of men. An alien look. An alien language. We can speak with our own words. We can look with our own eyes. And we can fight with our own weapons.' Dolnansky's monologue relates, evidently, to the film's politics of speech, the necessary but difficult task of finding a new language, and to the male gaze of 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. Having rejected this alien look and language, Dolnansky – in short, simple sentences repeating a collective feminist 'we' – exhorts the viewer to find new modes of expression. The last lines of the film thus gesture beyond it, to a future artistic practice that *Penthesilea* is a first attempt at. The monologue is given immediately after Dolnansky has left the stage and removed her makeup, a move similar to *Vent d'Est*, in which Godard shows the actors putting on makeup. In both we have an image of going behind the fiction to access truth. The removal of the makeup in *Penthesilea*, then, appears to illustrate the idea that when she speaks Dolnansky is no longer acting a pre-defined character, the Amazon stereotype. This is bolstered by a certain discourse of the period around video, which in their interview Johnston and Willemen are at pains to point out: the ideology that video allows immediate, direct self-expression.<sup>202</sup> However, as we

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<sup>201</sup> Erens, 'Penthesilea', pp. 34-5

<sup>202</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', pp. 127-8

have seen, Wollen himself had criticised Godard's simple opposition between fact and fiction, and the demand to speak in one's own words has an ironic ring in a film full of quotation. The threefold repetition and the voice heard off-screen giving instructions make clear that it is a scripted performance, further complicating the monologue's meaning.<sup>203</sup> In the film's final image, the bar of the video moving across a blank monitor screen, once more what has gone before is wiped away, but like the magic writing pad, a residue has been left behind in the mind of the viewer.

In *Penthesilea*, Mulvey and Wollen's concerns and positions interact, overdetermining certain devices and themes, bringing others into complementary or contradictory relations. The film is an object lesson in the relationship between their theory and practice. It allies the psychoanalytic critique of fantasy images of women articulated in Mulvey's 'Mr Jones' essay with Wollen's critical positions presented earlier in this chapter, his account of the exemplary historical model of the Soviet avant-garde, his theoretical account of the ontology of the modernist artwork, and his manifesto for a counter-cinematic practice via the work of Jean-Luc Godard. These function as both guidance and as challenge; while these models offer an inventory of devices and a philosophical framework for a political art, the problems Wollen diagnosed in them require the discovery of new strategies. Even so, *Penthesilea* is Mulvey and Wollen's most diagrammatic film – their films will become progressively more exploratory, the intended effects of their directorial decisions less consciously laid out in advance.

In the next chapter, I deepen this investigation of the interactions between Mulvey and Wollen's ideas and fields of investigation, concentrating on their writing on visual pleasure, melodrama and avant-garde film. Since I have accorded

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<sup>203</sup> Erens, 'Penthesilea', p. 35

greater attention to Wollen's work in this chapter, in chapter three I focus more on Mulvey, devoting two sections to her writings and, in the third and final section, showing how Wollen's conception of the 'third avant-garde' takes as its implicit model feminist counter-cinema. This will set up my analysis of *Riddles* in chapter 4, which in many respects takes its cues from the writings of the two years preceding it.

### 3. Passionate Detachment

#### ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’

In 1973 Mulvey gave a paper to the French department of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which would become ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’.<sup>1</sup> The title of the essay came, according to its author, from *Screen* editor Ben Brewster, who also assisted with the structure of the work, though not its content.<sup>2</sup> Mulvey’s notebooks from this period show numerous rewritings of the arguments of ‘Visual Pleasure’.<sup>3</sup> The difficult attempt to set these inchoate ideas down with clarity is indicative of their radical newness. The directness of the final work and the lapidary nature of some of its formulations, however, belie this laborious writing process. As Merck notes, Mulvey’s trouble with writing in the early 1970s is camouflaged by the ‘brisk beauty’ of the essay’s prose. ‘The power of its expression obscures the difficulty of its composition. The confidence of its declamation disguises any hesitancy in its formulation’.<sup>4</sup>

The overwhelming familiarity of ‘Visual Pleasure’ presents a problem. Writing in 1985, Judith Mayne states that ‘[i]t is only a slight exaggeration to say that most feminist film theory and criticism of the last decade has been a response, implicit or explicit, to the issues raised in Laura Mulvey’s article: the centrality of the look, cinema as spectacle and narrative, psychoanalysis as a critical tool’.<sup>5</sup> It is

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 6-18. Reprinted (with very slight alterations) in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 14-27. Citations are from the latter and given in text as ‘VPNC’

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014; Ben Brewster, email to the author, 7 September 2015

<sup>3</sup> These were shown to me by Mulvey on 3 February 2016

<sup>4</sup> Merck, ‘Mulvey’s Manifesto’, p. 18. For a detailed account of the historical and biographical circumstances of the text’s production, see pp. 4-10 in Merck’s essay

<sup>5</sup> Judith Mayne, ‘Feminist Film Theory and Criticism’, *Signs* 11:1 (Autumn, 1985), p. 83

conventionally designated the most cited essay in film studies,<sup>6</sup> and a fixture of undergraduate arts and humanities curricula. In other words, as Merck observes, it is a ‘canonical work’ that has been ‘applied, elaborated, interrogated, revised, refuted, and endless reiterated’.<sup>7</sup> It therefore has a status such that writing on it seems to require prefacing with some kind of justification for looking at it *again*. Nevertheless, an account of Mulvey and Wollen’s *oeuvre* obviously cannot skirt over it. I will therefore recapitulate the main elements of Mulvey’s argument, despite its familiarity, glossing where appropriate in order to set up my more interpretive comments that follow.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Merck, ‘Mulvey’s Manifesto’, p. 1; Eric Naiman, ‘Shklovsky’s Dog and Mulvey’s Pleasure: The Secret Life of Defamiliarization’, *Comparative Literature* 50:4 (Autumn, 1998), p. 333; Alastair Phillips, preface to dossier on ‘Visual Pleasure at 40’, *Screen* 56:4 (Winter, 2015), p. 471. The dossier which follows on pp. 472-485 is introduced by John David Rhodes and contains interventions by Tamar Garb, Joanna Hogg, Isaac Julien, Mandy Merck, Emma Wilson and Mulvey herself

<sup>7</sup> Merck, ‘Mulvey’s Manifesto’, p. 1. It is impossible to trace the full range of texts that can be connected back in some form to the intervention of ‘Visual Pleasure’. However, the afterlives of Mulvey’s text (up to the late 1980s) are delineated in Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, second edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-14; and in Clifford T. Manlove, ‘Visual “Drive” and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey’, *Cinema Journal* 46:3 (Spring, 2007), pp. 83-88. Constance Penley, ‘Introduction. The Lady Doesn’t Vanish: Feminism and Film Theory’, in Constance Penley (ed.), *Feminism and Film Theory* (London and New York: Routledge and BFI Publishing, 1988), pp. 1-24, provides a broader history of feminist film theory up to the late 1980s, indicating the determining role of Mulvey’s essay. *Camera Obscura* 20-21 (May/September, 1989), a special issue on ‘The Spectatrix’, collects a series of ‘Individual Responses’ from academics, filmmakers, etc. on the theme of ‘the female spectator’. Despite the variety of positions, if any consensus can be said to exist it is that ‘Visual Pleasure’ is the Ur-text for thinking about feminism and film spectatorship. The introduction to this issue by Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane, ‘The Female Spectator: Contexts and Directions’, pp. 6-8, also sketches the impact of Mulvey’s essay. A short, personal meditation on the influence of Visual Pleasure is Yvonne Rainer, ‘Mulvey’s Legacy’, *Camera Obscura* 63 (2006), p. 167. One of Mulvey’s recent reflections on the topic is ‘The Pleasure Principle’, *Sight and Sound* (June, 2015), pp. 50-51. The essay is the subject of *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (2007), a video by Emma Hedditch in which Mulvey reads the essay to camera and comments on it, interspersed with images of the text and related clips, signalling its continued resonance for contemporary feminist artists and researchers. It perhaps remains simply to be said that few other works of film theory are commemorated by a national cinema institution upon their 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, as ‘Visual Pleasure’ was by the BFI on 21 April 2015. See the *Screen* dossier on ‘Visual Pleasure at 40’ mentioned in the previous footnote, which documents the proceedings

<sup>8</sup> As well as the texts listed in footnote 8, limpid summaries and interpretations of Mulvey’s argument can be found in Annette Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures: Feminism and the Cinema*, second edition (London and New York: Verso, 1994), pp. 59-64; Merck, ‘Mulvey’s Manifesto’, pp. 10-13; Philip Rosen, ‘Screen and 1970s Film Theory’, in Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (eds.), *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 287-289; D. N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*, second edition (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 223-235; and Rodowick’s later work *The Difficulty of Difference: Psychoanalysis, Sexual Difference and Film Theory* (New

‘Visual Pleasure’ brings together four strands. The first is the anti-objectification politics of the women’s movement that had underpinned Mulvey’s writing from the beginning. This is the very ground of the article, the same premises and political demands that drove ‘Mr Jones’. Film, Mulvey argues, was primarily an ‘instrument’ through which to approach the broader question of ‘images of women’: ‘I was interested in film as such but what I was particularly absorbed in then was trying to crack those problems around women and spectacle and so on. And Hollywood just seemed so appropriate for that’.<sup>9</sup> This said, the second thread of ‘Visual Pleasure’ is a rigorous account of cinematic specificity in the construction of a look, and how this is bound up with narrative. In other words, ‘Visual Pleasure’ draws on the formalist methods circulating in film theory in the early 1970s.<sup>10</sup> Thirdly, this is charted in relation to mental processes described by psychoanalytic theory. Finally, the essay incorporates arguments from apparatus theory. Drawing these together, Mulvey proposes an elegant and polemical account of the gendered psychological operations of cinema.<sup>11</sup>

The main arguments are set out in the second and third parts of ‘Visual Pleasure’. Mulvey begins from two pleasures identified by psychoanalysis. The first, scopophilia, explained with reference to Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and ‘Instincts and their Vicissitudes’,<sup>12</sup> is the erotic pleasure derivable

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York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 1-17. However, see below for my disagreement with some of Rodowick’s claims

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014. The same basic foundation to an investigation of film can be seen in the magazine *Women and Film*, founded in California in 1972, and the writings in the UK of Claire Johnston and Pam Cook in the early- to mid-seventies

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive comparison of Mulvey’s essay with Shklovsky’s ‘Art as Device’, see Naiman, ‘Shklovsky’s Dog and Mulvey’s Pleasure’

<sup>11</sup> Mandy Merck drew my attention to this four-strand construction

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. VII (1901-1905)*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953), pp. 156-157; and ‘Instincts and their Vicissitudes’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIV (1914-1916)*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in

from subjecting another to one's gaze ('VPNC', 18). It forms part of the sexual instincts ('VPNC', 19). (These latter are one of two categories of 'primal instincts' (*Urtriebe*) that Freud identified in 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes'.)<sup>13</sup> As Mulvey notes, because it is objectifying, scopophilia implies a separation of looker and looked at ('VPNC', 18-19). The cinematic spectacle is therefore ideally suited to unlocking it. The typical diegesis is 'a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, *indifferent to the presence of the audience*, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy'. The cinematic apparatus reinforces scopophilic pleasure. Despite the fact that one is invited into the cinema, rather than watching illicitly, 'the extreme contrast between *the darkness in the auditorium* (which also *isolates the spectators from one another*) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen help to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation' ('VPNC', 17, my emphasis). Although Mulvey claims not to have read Christian Metz's 'The Imaginary Signifier', published in the issue of *Screen* immediately preceding 'Visual Pleasure', there are significant parallels here between the two texts.<sup>14</sup> Metz compares cinema and theatre in relation to the primal scene of psychoanalysis:

Certain precise features of the institution [of cinema] contribute to this affinity: *the obscurity surrounding the onlooker*, the aperture of the screen with its inevitable keyhole effect. But the affinity is more profound. It lies first in the *spectator's solitude* in the cinema: those attending a cinematic projection do not, as in the theatre, constitute a true "audience", a temporary collectivity; they are an accumulation of individuals who, despite appearances, more closely resemble the fragmented readers of a novel. It lies on the other hand in the fact that the

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collaboration with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), pp. 127-133

<sup>13</sup> Freud, 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes', p. 124

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 15 September 2015; Ben Brewster also deems it unlikely that they would have discussed Metz while editing. Email to the author, 7 September 2015



filmic spectacle, the object seen, is more *radically ignorant of its spectator* [than theatre], since he [*sic*] is not there [...].<sup>15</sup>

The second pleasure adduced by Mulvey is the narcissistic one of identification. The model here is Lacan's essay on the mirror stage, translated in *New Left Review* in 1968.<sup>16</sup> Lacan's claim, which hardly needs summary, is that the ego is constituted in a moment of misrecognition when a child between the ages of six and eighteen months looks at itself in the mirror, and imputes to itself the motor capacity and physical integrity it does not have. This identification with an image outside of itself, which takes on the function of the 'ideal ego', becomes the model for later identifications ('VPNC', 18).<sup>17</sup> If the first pleasure was a matter of the sexual instincts, here it is a question of ego libido ('VPNC', 19);<sup>18</sup> where the first was dependent on *separation from* the image, here it is founded on *identification with* the image. Again, Mulvey argues that this pleasure is catered to by cinematic codes: '[t]he conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form. Scale, space, stories are all anthropomorphic'. There is 'a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world' ('VPNC', 17-18). It follows that this narcissistic pleasure is correlated with narrative, inasmuch as it requires characters to be brought into play – there must be on-screen figures with a certain amount of attributes in order for identification to be possible. The convincing illusionistic world of Hollywood films, drawing the spectator into

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<sup>15</sup> Christian Metz, 'The Imaginary Signifier', trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen* 16:2 (Summer, 1975), p. 64, my emphasis

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the Function of the I', trans. Jean Rousset, *New Left Review* 1/51 (September-October 1968), pp. 71-77

<sup>17</sup> Lacan, 'The Mirror-Phase', pp. 71-73

<sup>18</sup> That is, the second of the primal instincts identified by Freud in 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes', p. 124

the fiction at the expense of their awareness of being in the cinema, encourages identification with the image. Meanwhile, stars capably carry out the part of ego ideals ('VPNC', 18). As with scopophilia, the cinematic *dispositif* abets film form in relation to identificatory pleasure. Although Mulvey merely points to the similar framing functions of screen and mirror ('VPNC', 18), the analogy mirror stage-cinematic apparatus had been discussed at greater length in a text I have already mentioned in relation to Wollen, Baudry's 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus':

The arrangement of the different elements – projector, darkened hall, screen [...] reconstructs the situation necessary to the release of the “mirror stage” discovered by Lacan. [...] But for this imaginary constitution of the self to be possible, there must be – Lacan strongly emphasizes this point – two complementary conditions: immature powers of mobility and a precocious maturation of visual organization [...]. If one considers that these two conditions are repeated during cinematographic projection – suspension of mobility and predominance of the visual function – perhaps one could suppose that this is more than a simple analogy.<sup>19</sup>

As Ed Buscombe, Christine Gledhill, Alan Lovell and Christopher Williams show in a statement on psychoanalysis and cinema in the following issue of *Screen*, the parallel between mirror stage and film is a common theme in the journal in this period. The other two examples Buscombe *et al* offer, however – from Metz and from a reply to Julia Lesage co-authored by Ben Brewster, Stephen Heath and Colin MacCabe – treat the mirror stage analogy much less literally than Mulvey and Baudry. Metz, for instance, argues that the identification that takes place is not primarily with characters but with ‘a pure act of perception’.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', trans. Alan Williams, in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Vol. II* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985), p. 539

<sup>20</sup> Ed Buscombe, Christine [erroneously credited as Christopher] Gledhill, Alan Lovell and Christopher Williams, 'Statement: Psychoanalysis', *Screen* 16:4 (Winter 1975), p. 126; Ben

As Wollen observes in a much later essay, Mulvey also takes from Lacan a hostility to the ego. Where Lacan assailed ego psychology, Mulvey declares that '[t]he satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked' ('VPNC', 16).<sup>21</sup> Despite the emphasis on Lacan in this section, and despite the occasional appearance in the essay of terms and phrases of a Lacanian stripe – 'desire, born with language' ('VPNC', 19) – it should be stressed that Freud, not Lacan, is the essay's primary theoretical influence. Thus Mulvey's discussion of castration (see below), though mentioning the symbolic order and the law of the father, turns around the penis (Freud), not the phallus (Lacan) ('VPNC', 22).<sup>22</sup> A tendency to associate Mulvey with a more strictly Lacanian position has arisen perhaps due to Mulvey's frequent use of the term 'gaze', with its Lacanian associations, reinforced by the way the phrase 'male gaze' (only used twice in 'Visual Pleasure') has turned into a catchphrase. However, Mulvey uses the term 'gaze' with its common-sense meaning of 'prolonged look' rather than the specialised meaning attached to it by Lacan in his development of it as a technical term, notably in Seminar XI, where the gaze comes to mean not the subject's gaze but something in the field of the object.<sup>23</sup> Mulvey, in fairness, never claims to use the term in a Lacanian manner.

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Brewster, Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath, 'Comment', *Screen* 16:2 (Summer, 1975), pp. 83-90; Metz's account of the mirror stage-cinema parallel is 'Imaginary Signifier', pp. 48-52

<sup>21</sup> Peter Wollen, 'On Gaze Theory', *New Left Review* 44 (March-April, 2007), p. 100

<sup>22</sup> Ben Brewster states that '[w]hat struck me at the time was how little it relied on Lacan, whose ideas everyone was trying to deal with at the time'. Email to the author, 7 September 2015. It is significant as well that, although earlier a member of the History group, in which she read Freud, Mulvey never joined the Lacan Study Group that numerous History group members went on to be part of. (Members of the Lacan Study Group included Parveen Adams, Rosalind Coward, Elizabeth Cowie, Mary Kelly and Jacqueline Rose.) Mulvey interview, 4 August 2014; see the contributions by Mary Kelly, Jacqueline Rose and Parveen Adams, in 'On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Period of Time', available as a .pdf at <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/50401> (accessed 28 March 2016), pp. 11-12 and 16

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 105 and 109; Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 4-6.

McGowan notes that the term '*le regard*' that Lacan uses in his later work never occurs in the mirror

The third part of the essay introduces a crucial element: the psychic mechanisms described above are distributed along the axes male-female and active-passive. In a patriarchal mode of representation like classical Hollywood cinema, the object of the scopophilic drive, looked at by spectators and male characters alike, is female. Meanwhile, the figure of identification is male, allowing the spectator vicarious satisfaction through his control of narrative and erotic look at female characters ('VPNC', 19-21). Mulvey demonstrates the troubled equilibrium between these two forces with reference to Howard Hawks: in the early scenes of *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) and *To Have and Have Not* (1944) the female star is sexualised and on display, object of the combined gaze of spectator and male characters; as the film progresses this specular pleasure is de-emphasised, but the spectator is compensated by identification with the male protagonist who eventually possesses the female star in the film's story ('VPNC', 21-22). Mulvey also plots the above in relation to cinema's construction of time and space. The female body creates stasis, freezing narrative progress in moments of erotic spectacle. Returning to the concerns of apparatus theory, Mulvey argues that close-ups on the female body fragment and flatten the Renaissance space that dominates classical cinema ('VPNC', 19-20).

It is worth noting some of the criticisms that have been levelled at the ideas in the above paragraph, since this clarifies some of Mulvey's assumptions. First, the structure is set up in a heteronormative manner: erotic looking is defined as

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stage essay. While the latest, now standard, English version of the mirror stage essay in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), pp. 75-81, follows Lacan in eschewing the word 'gaze', the *New Left Review* translation and the version in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 1977) (the latter circulating in London some years before its official publication, for instance among members of the Lacan Study Group) both contain the English term 'gaze', adding to the confusion.

masculine because its object is female. Clearly this is open to objection from a queer perspective.<sup>24</sup> Second, it ignores the fact that the male protagonist can also be an object of erotic contemplation.<sup>25</sup> Third, Mulvey equates exhibitionism (the sexualisation and display of the female star) with passivity, though evidently there are examples within Hollywood cinema of female characters consciously manipulating the way they are viewed.<sup>26</sup> Fourth, there is the premise that identification with the male protagonist necessarily puts the spectator in a male position.<sup>27</sup> As many critics raising these points have stated, Freud's position on psychic processes is much more flexible, allowing for displacements from active to passive in terms of scopophilia-exhibitionism,<sup>28</sup> and the interdependence of the different aspects of the drives in each individual (he writes, for instance, that 'anyone who is an exhibitionist in his [*sic*] unconscious is at the same time a voyeur').<sup>29</sup> Freud's account of fantasy might also allow for an understanding of identification across gender.<sup>30</sup> As Rodowick notes, for Freud, sexual identities are never fully settled.<sup>31</sup> Overall, we can say that Mulvey – precisely to stress the

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<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, Diane Waldman's contribution in the 'Individual Responses' section of *Camera Obscura* 20-21, p. 309; and remarks by Anna Marie Taylor, Julia Lesage and Michelle Citron in Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, Judith Mayne, B. Ruby Rich and Anna Marie Taylor, 'Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics', *New German Critique* 13 (Winter, 1978), pp. 87-88, 90 and 91, respectively

<sup>25</sup> Paul Willemen, 'The Fourth Look', *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington, Indianapolis and London: Indiana University Press and BFI Publishing, 1994), p. 102; Miriam Hansen, 'Pleasure, Identification, Ambivalence: Valentino and Female Spectatorship', *Cinema Journal* 25:4 (Summer, 1986), pp. 7-10; Steve Neale, 'Sexual Difference in Cinema – Issues of Fantasy, Narrative and the Look', *Oxford Literary Review* 8:1-2 (1986), p. 128

<sup>26</sup> See Kaja Silverman's contribution to 'Individual Responses', p. 287, in which she points to *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) and *Lola Montès*

<sup>27</sup> See contributions to 'Individual Responses' by Elizabeth Cowie (p. 129) and D. N. Rodowick (p. 269); see also the latter's *Difficulty of Difference*, pp. vii-ix

<sup>28</sup> Freud, 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes', pp. 126-127, 129-130

<sup>29</sup> Freud, *Three Essays*, p. 167

<sup>30</sup> 'Individual Responses' by Cowie (p. 129) and Rodowick (p. 270-271). This suggestion, however, is criticised by Jacqueline Rose in 'Individual Responses', p. 275, for moving too far in the opposite direction, underplaying the extent to which spectators' identificatory possibilities are bounded

<sup>31</sup> Rodowick, *Difficulty of Difference*, p. x

determining role of gender in these psychological dynamics – makes Freud more rigid. (I take up some of these matters again in chapter five.)

For Mulvey, the female body is central to the organisation of film form. However, the image of woman is not merely pleasurable but threatening, evoking the possibility of castration. Mulvey proffers two defence mechanisms that narrative cinema has developed in an attempt to mitigate this dangerous psychological repercussion ('VPNC', 22). First, fetishism, a cult of the female star disavowing her dangerous lack. Once more, Mulvey associates this with one of cinema's two poles – fetishism works via spectacle, utilising 'the look alone' ('VPNC', 22). Sternberg's films with Marlene Dietrich are a privileged expression of this – Sternberg's concern with plot is minimal; the films are rife with scenes of Dietrich's character on stage, freezing the narrative; Dietrich herself is a 'perfect product' ('VPNC', 23). The basic argument, the woman's body as emblem of male fetishistic disavowal, is carried over from 'Mr Jones'. But the interest in fetishism also parallels contemporaneous claims by other film theorists. Buscombe *et al*'s 'Statement: Psychoanalysis and Film' draws attention to three distinct uses of the concept in *Screen* by Heath, Metz and Mulvey.<sup>32</sup> For Heath, fetishism is a characteristic of representation in general, the subject set in place in a 'position of separation' and in 'imaginary coherence' by a representation, while remaining unaware of this setting-in-place.<sup>33</sup> Metz conceives fetishism slightly less broadly, not as a characteristic of representation *tout court* but of the cinema's technical equipment and the disavowal necessitated in the spectator in order to be caught up in the fiction.<sup>34</sup> Mulvey's position is more specific, turning on the image of woman within the diegesis. It has a

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<sup>32</sup> Buscombe *et al*, 'Statement: Psychoanalysis and Film', p. 126

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Heath, 'Lessons from Brecht', *Screen* 15:2 (Summer, 1974), p. 106

<sup>34</sup> Metz, 'Imaginary Signifier', pp. 67-73

closer forebear in the analysis of Sternberg's *Morocco* by the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*, who like Mulvey regard Dietrich as fetishised, inaccessible and perfect, a figure who (in later films like 1932's *Blonde Venus*) tends to 'parasitize' and 'devour' the narrative.<sup>35</sup>

The other defence mechanism is that of sadistic voyeurism, the investigation and punishment of the female protagonist in order to make her safe. Here narrative is required, for '[s]adism demands a story' ('VPNC', 22). Mulvey notes that this is a favoured strategy in film noir. While as a plot feature this is indeed a recurring theme in a collection like E. Ann Kaplan's *Women in Film Noir*,<sup>36</sup> in 'Visual Pleasure' it is articulated in relation to looking as well. This is clarified by Mulvey's use of Hitchcock's films as demonstration. In *Vertigo* (1958), Scottie (James Stewart) subjects Madeleine (Kim Novak) both to his will and to his gaze.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the ostensible dialectic of the essay's construction – parts 2 and 3 are divided into sections A, B and C, implying a thesis, antithesis and synthesis or sublation – Mulvey's argument is constructed from a string of dichotomies: ego libido/sexual instincts, narrative/spectacle, male/female, active/passive, Renaissance space/flatness, linear time/stasis, sadistic investigation/fetishism and, as I explore below, dominant cinema/counter cinema. 'Visual Pleasure' continues the theme of the absent woman in film that Christine Gledhill has shown can be traced back through Johnston's 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema' to the first issue of

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<sup>35</sup> Collective text, 'Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco*', trans. Diana Matias, in Nick Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma, Volume 3, 1969-1972* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 184, originally 'Morocco, de Josef von Sternberg', *Cahiers du cinéma* 225 (November-December 1970)

<sup>36</sup> E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI, 1978)

<sup>37</sup> So much has been written about this that more exposition seems unnecessary. Alternative readings of Hitchcock with reference to Mulvey are made by the following authors, to name just three: Jeanne Allen, 'Looking Through "Rear Window": Hitchcock's Traps and Lures of Heterosexual Romance', E. Deidre Pribram (ed.), *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television* (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 31-44; Manlove, 'Visual "Drive" and Cinematic Narrative', pp. 90-103; Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, pp. 69-102

*Women and Film*.<sup>38</sup> It is especially close to the Lacan-influenced iteration of this proposed by Johnston and Pam Cook's work on Raoul Walsh. Cook and Johnston trace this absence in the text; women function as empty signs, defined negatively in relation to the patriarchal order.<sup>39</sup> 'Visual Pleasure' extends the non-place of woman to the cinema auditorium.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, the psychoanalytic influences on Mulvey's text hint at another influence, never stated explicitly: Althusser. In a contribution to a poll conducted by Jonathan Rosenbaum in 1976, Mulvey's list of her favourite texts includes two by the French philosopher – 'Freud and Lacan' and 'The State and Ideology', the latter presumably a reference to 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)'.<sup>41</sup> In 'Freud and Lacan', Althusser advocates Lacan's description of the ego's coming into being via misrecognition in the mirror stage as a model for thinking about ideology.<sup>42</sup> This is expanded in 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', where he writes that '*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject'.<sup>43</sup> Ideology "recruits" subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or

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<sup>38</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3:4 (1978), pp. 458-459

<sup>39</sup> Pam Cook and Claire Johnston, 'The Place of Woman in the Cinema of Raoul Walsh', in Phil Hardy (ed.), *The Cinema of Raoul Walsh* (London: Edinburgh Film Festival/BFI, 1974), pp. 96-97. Fetishism and castration both figure in Cook and Johnston's reading of Walsh's *The Revolt of Mamie Stover* (1956)

<sup>40</sup> A parallel noted by B. Ruby Rich in relation to its possibly disabling effects in Citron *et al*, 'Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics', p. 87

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'My Favorite Films/Texts/Things: Jonathan Rosenbaum Polls 29 British Filmpersons', *Film Comment* 12:6 (Nov-Dec 1976), p. 54. Mulvey also points to the importance of 'Freud and Lacan' in various interviews: Laura Mulvey, 'Women & Representation: A Discussion with Laura Mulvey' (interview with Jane Clarke, Sue Clayton, Joanna Cleland, Rosie Elliott and Mandy Merck), *Wedge* 2 (Spring, 1978), p. 49; 'Unravelling the Puzzle', p. 3; 'Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture' (interview with Roberta Sassatelli), *Theory, Culture & Society* 28:5 (September, 2011), p. 126

<sup>42</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Freud and Lacan', trans. Ben Brewster, *New Left Review* 1/65 (May-June, 1969), p. 65

<sup>43</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)', *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 173



“transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most common everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” By recognising their hailing, understanding that they are addressed, the individual becomes a subject.<sup>44</sup> Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’ is a transposition of this argument, with spectator and film taking the place of individual and ideology, respectively. The viewer is hailed (as male) by the film, via identification with – recognition of themselves in – male characters. The film interpellates the viewer. Althusser’s distinction between individuals and subjects might indicate why in Mulvey’s argument the viewer is interpellated as a male spectatorial *subject* even if the *individual* viewer in the cinema is not. This raises the question of the viewer’s possible resistance to the male gaze; Mulvey’s essay can be read not as an account of how the dominant cinema ‘really works’ but of its ideal functioning as an ideological system. If one does this, one also has a partial explanation of the heteronormativity of Mulvey’s model and the rigidity in her use of Freud, as it is now an account of the erotic pleasure and spectatorial gendering that the dominant patriarchal cinema seeks to produce, something always imperfect in practice.<sup>45</sup>

The thinking of film as a system that produces the spectator in particular subject positions is, of course, characteristic of a wider problematic in *Screen* in the 1970s. As commentators such as Rodowick and Philip Rosen observe, the viewing subject postulated by male writers in *Screen* is highly abstract; by gendering the film

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<sup>44</sup> Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, p. 174

<sup>45</sup> Hence a critique like Noël Carroll’s, which proffers cinematic examples countering Mulvey’s argument, adding necessary contradictions to her claims, but does not refute its overarching point. See Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 260-274

spectator (by paying attention to particular privileged objects within the diegesis as well as the cinematic apparatus and general structures of film construction like editing) Mulvey's essay makes a first step towards making this subject more concrete and specific.<sup>46</sup> While she herself does not do so, this evidently implies extension to race, class, sexuality, and so on.<sup>47</sup>

Despite its attack on Hollywood, 'Visual Pleasure' is an *auteurist* text. Its account of Hollywood is filtered through the 'great directors' of Mulvey's cinephile background. Unsurprisingly, there is considerable overlap with Wollen at this juncture. The directors Mulvey mentions by name (Boetticher, Hitchcock and Sternberg) or whose work she discusses in detail (Hawks) had all been written about in Wollen's 'Lee Russell' director studies of the 1960s. Mulvey quotes and paraphrases remarks by Boetticher and Sternberg that had appeared earlier in Wollen's writing ('VPNC', 20 and 22).<sup>48</sup> Most interestingly, Wollen partially sketches the task that would be completed by 'Visual Pleasure' in his 1969 essay 'Hitchcock's Vision':

The act of watching dominates [Hitchcock's] films, both in the narration and in the narrative, in his style as director and in the relations between the *dramatis personae*. [...] To analyse his work we need [...] a concrete and meaningful psychology-semiology of gazing, watching, observing. The elementary terms for this are to be found, of course, in the work of Freud, in concepts such as skoptophilia [*sic*] ('gazing impulse', voyeurism) and exhibitionism.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, pp. 221 and 223-224; Rosen, 'Screen and 1970s Film Theory', pp. 288-289

<sup>47</sup> The need for this extension along other axes is a refrain of the *Camera Obscura* issue on 'The Spectatrix'. See, for example, Bergstrom and Doane, 'The Female Spectator', pp. 8-9, and the 'Individual Responses' by Rhona Berenstein, p. 92 and Jacqueline Bobo, p. 102

<sup>48</sup> Compare with Lee Russell [Peter Wollen], 'Budd Boetticher', *New Left Review* 1/32 (July-August 1965), p. 82 and Lee Russell, 'Josef von Sternberg', *New Left Review* 1/36 (March/April 1966), p. 78

<sup>49</sup> Wollen, 'Hitchcock's Vision', *Cinema* 1:3 (June 1969), p. 2

Wollen, however, makes no reference to the gaze constructed by Hitchcock being gendered.

Mulvey values *auteurs* like Sternberg and Hitchcock for the way they ‘take the look almost as the content or subject matter of their films’ (‘VPNC’, 22), narrativising voyeurism and fetishism in a self-aware doubling of cinema’s psychological mechanisms at the level of plot.<sup>50</sup> The directors recruited to illustrate the functioning of the dominant cinema are therefore posited as already producing proto-modernist, reflexive cinematic fables. In this respect, they are uniquely weak as well as strong examples – few films make voyeurism as central to the plot as *Vertigo* and *Rear Window* (1956), and few accord as crucial a role to the female body and spectacle as *The Blue Angel* (1930), *Morocco* and *Blonde Venus*, in which Dietrich plays nightclub performers. Meanwhile, Mulvey’s continued reference to a cinephile canon set in a critical deconstruction of the mechanisms and implications of classical cinema is exemplary of what Thomas Elsaesser calls ‘cinephile disenchantment’,<sup>51</sup> mentioned in my first chapter, the ambivalent object relation towards film held by the cinephile turned critical theorist summarised by Metz’s remark that ‘one should ideally no longer love the cinema and yet still love it’.<sup>52</sup>

In *The Crisis of Political Modernism* and *The Difficulty of Difference*, Rodowick understands Mulvey to advocate spectacle against narrative and the characteristics accrued to it (illusionism, three-dimensional diegesis, transparency, linearity), inasmuch as spectacle breaks up the latter, containing ‘the potentiality of a materialist film practice’.<sup>53</sup> He reads ‘Visual Pleasure’ back through Mulvey’s essay

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<sup>50</sup> This is noted with respect to Mulvey’s use of Hitchcock in Naiman, ‘Shklovsky’s Dog’, p. 336

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Cinephilia, or the Uses of Disenchantment’, in Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (eds.), *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), pp. 32-33

<sup>52</sup> Metz, ‘Imaginary Signifier’, p. 26

<sup>53</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, pp. 231-232

‘Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde’ from the late 1970s,<sup>54</sup> and through the *écriture féminine* expounded in the writing of Kristeva and Michèle Montrelay, identifying the spectacle of the female body with this *écriture*, although there is little textual or biographical evidence that Mulvey was thinking with this concept at the time.<sup>55</sup> In Rodowick’s gloss, because femininity is for Mulvey a ‘force of negation that returns to erode or undermine this narrative system’, this means that ‘[t]he imaging of woman in patriarchal culture can now be reconsidered in film theory as the foundation for an alternative theoretical and aesthetic practice.’<sup>56</sup> It is true that Mulvey asserts that the spectacle of woman can undercut the depth and linearity of diegesis and narrative (‘VPNC’, 19-20). However, while Mulvey thinks that Hollywood films have to work to hold together this internal tension, it is not a question of advocating one side of the contradiction. Spectacle in itself is not valorised by Mulvey. She makes no radical claims for the politics of Sternberg’s films, nor for musicals, despite mentioning that the song and dance numbers in the latter disturb narrative flow (‘VPNC’, 19). Spectacle for Mulvey is, after all, closely allied with fetishism. Similarly, Rodowick claims that Sternberg, and indeed Hitchcock, gesture towards a possible counter cinema.<sup>57</sup> However, although I have noted the reflexivity Mulvey discerns in these directors, her account of counter cinema does not derive from them but from the two effaced looks of cinema, as I argue below. My understanding here is grounded in Mulvey and Wollen’s films: they are not anti-narrative (though the degree of narrative content varies), nor do they pursue a strategy of spectacle as disruption, nor do they attempt to make fetishism the basis of a radical film practice (e.g. via a parodic hyper-fetishisation).

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<sup>54</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, pp. 228-229

<sup>55</sup> This is not to say that Mulvey was not aware of their work

<sup>56</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, pp. 228 and 230

<sup>57</sup> Rodowick, *Difficulty of Difference*, p. 15

The female figure that troubles narrative and creates castration anxiety is a product of patriarchy just as much as the system it destabilises, therefore it cannot be the unproblematic foundation of a counter-practice.

Two structuring absences are discernible in 'Visual Pleasure'. The first is melodrama, a Hollywood genre generally assumed to imply a female spectator. The exclusion of melodrama from 'Visual Pleasure' is not an oversight but a product of Mulvey's desire to make the essay as streamlined and direct as possible.<sup>58</sup> The possibilities of the genre for a differently gendered mode of spectatorship are elaborated by Mulvey in various other texts from the 1970s. This bolsters the claim that the theses of 'Visual Pleasure' ought to be seen in a tempered manner – Mulvey is evidently aware that they do not apply to every Hollywood film. As Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane note, the interest in melodrama that followed 'Visual Pleasure' evinced by the writings of Doane, E. Ann Kaplan, Tania Modleski, Diane Waldman and Linda Williams (and, I might add, Mulvey herself), follows from the text-centred paradigm that 'Visual Pleasure' represents: if the spectator is a function of the text, then attention must be turned to those texts that offer alternative spectatorial positions.<sup>59</sup>

The second absence is the avant-garde. While melodrama is a blind spot, a hollow space within the dominant cinema, the avant-garde stands outside. It is not absent from 'Visual Pleasure', only from the central, famous argument described above, since it functions as a counterpoint in the first and last sections of the essay. Like Wollen, Mulvey conceives of the avant-garde primarily as oppositional, the negative of Hollywood, although she asserts that this need not be a permanent condition ('VPNC', 16). While most responses to 'Visual Pleasure' have focused on

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 20 November 2015

<sup>59</sup> Bergstrom and Doane, 'The Female Spectator', pp. 7-8

its account of classical Hollywood cinema, Rodowick and Merck have indicated its status as polemic for a new counter cinema.<sup>60</sup> (Merck also demonstrates the text's mirroring of this in its manifesto form, excavating its modernist antecedents.) Indeed, there is a thorough interdependence of these two aspects of 'Visual Pleasure'. On the one hand, as with melodrama, the female spectator must be generated by a different kind of text, and here the avant-garde has a privileged place as terrain where cinematic conventions can be taken apart, examined, rearranged or thrown out. As with Wollen, a critical examination of the mainstream is the precursor to a counter-cinematic project, which will make new texts and seek to bring into being new viewing subjects, including the female spectator ('VPNC', 14).<sup>61</sup> '[T]he concept of female spectatorship was born in my mind', Mulvey states, 'first and foremost, as a political aspiration, something that would only come into being out of a collective critical practice and creativity'.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, this critique of classical cinema is also the product of an incipient counter cinema throwing into relief the contingency of dominant forms and posing itself as an alternative. The theoretical questions arise, as Marx suggested, 'where the material conditions for their solution are known to be on hand or at least in the process of development'.<sup>63</sup>

To elucidate Mulvey's conception of the avant-garde it is necessary to summarise the structure of cinematic looks outlined in 'Visual Pleasure'. While Mulvey allows that voyeurism, fetishism and so on are not specific to film, film allows them to attain 'a perfect and beautiful contradiction':

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<sup>60</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 225-226; Merck, 'Mulvey's Manifesto', pp. 4-10

<sup>61</sup> See also Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 232

<sup>62</sup> Mulvey, contribution to 'Individual Responses', p. 249

<sup>63</sup> Karl Marx, "'Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*', in *Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 160

Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged. ('VPNC', 26)

Mulvey specifies 'three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion'. The tendency of narrative cinema is to 'deny the first two and subordinate them to the third' ('VPNC', 26). Mulvey states that some of these ideas were drawn from Wollen's inaugural lecture at Northwestern.<sup>64</sup> In this lecture Wollen, drawing on linguistic analyses of tense and person, enumerates four looks, grouped into two categories:

1. External.     The camera & the spectator look at the actors.  
                  Camera – pro-filmic action.  
                  Spectator – images on screen (image-track).
2. Internal.     The actors look at each other.  
                  Or the actor can reverse the gaze of the camera & the  
                  spectator by looking directly at them – at the camera, at  
                  the spectator.<sup>65</sup>

Evidently, the first three are those described by Mulvey. Wollen adds that the first category forms 'the cinematic event' (involving camera and spectators, both off screen) and the second 'the narrated event' (concerning the characters in the fiction), on the model of Jakobson's distinction between 'speech event' and 'narrated event', or Benveniste's between the 'enunciation' and the 'enunciate'.<sup>66</sup> In parallel, Wollen

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014

<sup>65</sup> Peter Wollen, untitled document (inaugural Northwestern lecture notes) in 'Film Theory 2 (ancient)', Item 100, Box B, Peter Wollen archive, BFI Special Collections, London, p. 1. This document accords very closely with the description of Wollen's lecture given to me by Mulvey

<sup>66</sup> Wollen, untitled document (inaugural Northwestern lecture notes) in 'Film Theory 2 (ancient)', p. 1

finds three kinds of time in cinema, the internal time of the fiction, and the external times of filmmaking and film viewing. Wollen argues that challenges to these constructions of space and time have primarily been made by avant-garde directors like Deren, Frampton, Straub and Godard, whose works ‘hinge precisely on the structure of time and person’.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, Mulvey conceives counter-cinema as aiming to liberate and make visible the ‘external’ looks and temporalities pertaining to the cinematic event – those of the camera and the spectator – heretofore suppressed by the tyranny of the ‘internal’, narrated event: ‘[t]he first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment’ (‘VPNC’, 27). However, Mulvey also ‘dressed’ Wollen’s model ‘in psychoanalytic clothes’.<sup>68</sup> The looks of the camera and spectator are ‘subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego’ in narrative cinema (‘VPNC’, 26), which requires their disavowal in order to maintain identification, voyeurism and fetishism; by bringing them to attention, counter cinema interrupts the mechanisms of patriarchal fantasy. As Merck notes, the call to emancipate the camera into its own time and space of recording also alludes to Dziga Vertov’s demand to ‘affirm the cinema-eye with its dimensions of time and space’ in his 1923 text ‘Film Directors, A Revolution’, placing Mulvey’s counter cinema in a modernist lineage.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile, the ‘dialectics and passionate detachment’, by which the spectator becomes conscious of their own (voyeuristic)

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<sup>67</sup> Wollen, untitled document (inaugural Northwestern lecture notes) in ‘Film Theory 2 (ancient)’, p. 5. Wollen recapitulates the arguments about cinematic time in ‘Introduction to *Citizen Kane*’, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 54-55

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014

<sup>69</sup> Merck, pp. 6-7; Dziga Vertov, ‘Film Directors, A Revolution’, trans. Richard Sherwood, *Screen* 12:4 (Winter, 1971), p. 53



position and practice in the cinema, channels the anti-ego slant of Lacanian psychoanalysis into a Brecht-influenced aesthetic of spectatorial distance. The two moves would seem, in fact, to correspond with strategies two and three of ‘Godard and Counter Cinema’, namely foregrounding (of the technology of cinema) and estrangement (of the viewer).

Wollen’s inaugural Northwestern lecture, as I noted, spoke of a fourth look, that of a character in the diegesis looking out at camera and spectator, a look almost entirely absent from classical Hollywood but present in films like *Vent d’Est, Deux fois* and Steve Dwoskin’s *Trixi* (1969).<sup>70</sup> While not mentioned in the published version of ‘Visual Pleasure’, this fourth look had been present in earlier drafts in a discussion of Dwoskin. As with melodrama, however, the inclusion of this section would have complicated the exposition of the ordering of looks in mainstream cinema and interfered with the directness that gives the text its rhetorical force.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the perceived misogyny of Dwoskin’s films, which in this period overwhelmingly take as their subject matter naked female bodies in erotic situations, made it difficult to proffer them as a counter-strategy in a feminist context, despite the fact that Mulvey read them as commentaries on, rather than simply examples of, the male gaze.<sup>72</sup> This ‘fourth look’, however, would be elaborated in relation to Dwoskin not long afterwards by Paul Willemen, who was familiar with an earlier version of Mulvey’s essay.<sup>73</sup> This device, which obstructs the fantasy of the fiction

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<sup>70</sup> Wollen, untitled document (inaugural Northwestern lecture notes) in ‘Film Theory 2 (ancient)’, p. 2

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014. See also Laura Mulvey, ‘Stephen Dwoskin’, *Sight and Sound* (September, 2012), p. 74

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 20 November 2015

<sup>73</sup> Paul Willemen, ‘Fourth Look’ (the text was originally published as ‘Voyeurism, the Look and Dwoskin’ in *Afterimage* 6 (Summer, 1976), pp. 40-51); interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014

and troubles the voyeuristic gaze by acknowledging the audience's existence, is employed in Mulvey and Wollen's first three films.

'Visual Pleasure' is one third of a tripartite model, its account of the dominant trends in classical Hollywood cinema implicitly pointing to the counter currents of melodrama and the avant-garde. The latter is elaborated at greater length in Mulvey and Wollen's films and in Mulvey's text 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde', discussed in chapter four. Melodrama, meanwhile, is conceptualised in a number of texts more or less concurrent with 'Visual Pleasure'.

### **Mulvey, Sirk and Melodrama**

In 1972, the same year as the Edinburgh Film Festival Women's Event, the festival held a Sirk retrospective, organised primarily by Jon Halliday.<sup>74</sup> As with the other single director retrospectives at Edinburgh in the period 1969 to 1975 – including the 1969 Samuel Fuller one that involved Wollen – there was an accompanying book of essays, titled *Douglas Sirk* and co-edited by Halliday and Mulvey, with a short joint introduction.<sup>75</sup> Halliday, a cinema-going companion of Mulvey and Wollen, was on the boards of *New Left Review* and *Screen*. It was Halliday's influence that awakened Mulvey's interest in Sirk, although she recalls that initially she wasn't impressed when he took her to see Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959).<sup>76</sup> Halliday had edited *Sirk on Sirk*,<sup>77</sup> a book of interviews with the director, in 1971, commissioned by Wollen as part of the Cinema One series when he was still

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<sup>74</sup> Jon Halliday, 'Douglas Sirk Retrospective', *26<sup>th</sup> Edinburgh International Film Festival* (1972 programme), pp. 4-5

<sup>75</sup> Jon Halliday and Laura Mulvey (eds.), *Douglas Sirk* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival in association with the National Film Theatre and John Player and Sons, 1972)

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014

<sup>77</sup> Jon Halliday (ed.), *Sirk on Sirk: Interviews with Jon Halliday* (London: Secker and Warburg/BFI, 1971)

working at the BFI Education Department.<sup>78</sup> Mulvey suggests that her involvement with *Douglas Sirk* was small and that at this point she hadn't yet worked out her own line on melodrama.<sup>79</sup> It is noticeable that unlike Halliday, and unlike Wollen in the Fuller book, there is no essay by Mulvey in the collection. In 1974, for the same issue of *Spare Rib* that contained Mary Kelly's article on *Penthesilea*, Mulvey reviewed Rainer Werner Fassbinder's recently released *Fear Eats the Soul*, focussing on the intertextual aspect of the film, the way it remakes and extends Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955).<sup>80</sup> Finally, as part of a SEFT weekend school held in London from 25-27 March 1977, Mulvey presented a paper that would become 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama'.<sup>81</sup> This is her most developed theorisation of director and genre in this period. Sirk has remained an essential point of orientation for her work since the 1970s, with Mulvey writing about him in every decade up to the 2000s.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Structuralism implies a certain kind of methodology...', interview with Gerald Peary and Stuart Kaminsky, *Film Heritage* 9:4 (Fall 1974), p. 23

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 20 November 2015

<sup>80</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Fear Eats the Soul', *Spare Rib* 30 (November, 1974), pp. 40-41. Re-published as 'Fassbinder and Sirk' in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 47-50. Citations from this reprint

<sup>81</sup> Published as 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama' in *Movie 25* (Winter, 1977-78), pp. 53-56, and reprinted in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1987), pp. 75-79. A slightly different version of the same paper was published under the title 'Douglas Sirk and Melodrama', *Australian Journal of Screen Theory* 3 (1977), pp. 26-30. A third version appears as 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama' in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 41-46. I refer throughout to the *Visual and Other Pleasures* version (citations in main body of my text) unless explicitly stated.

A review of the SEFT weekend school was published as 'Report on the Weekend School' by Griselda Pollock, in a melodrama dossier in *Screen* 18:2 (Summer, 1977), pp. 105-113. This dossier also includes Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's paper from the event, 'Minnelli and Melodrama', pp. 113-118, and 'A Note on "Family Romance"' by Stephen Heath and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, pp. 118-119

<sup>82</sup> Remarkd on by Mulvey in 'Unravelling the Puzzle', p. 17, and in an interview with the author on 4 August 2014. For evidence of this see, in the 1980s, 'Melodrama Inside and Outside the Home', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 66-81, originally published as 'Melodrama In and Out of the Home', in Colin MacCabe (ed.), *High Theory/Low Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 80-100; in the 1990s, "'It Will Be a Magnificent Obsession": The Melodrama's Role in the Development of Contemporary Film Theory', in Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill (eds.), *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen* (London: BFI, 1994), pp. 121-133; in the 2000s, the chapter 'Delaying Cinema' in Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), pp. 144-160

The 1970s texts exhibit the auteurism already encountered in ‘Visual Pleasure’. As Mulvey reflects slightly later, ‘[f]or me, the melodrama is represented first and foremost by Douglas Sirk and the movies he made during the 1950s’.<sup>83</sup> This inclination is overt in the earlier work, as *Douglas Sirk* – with its cover image of the director – focuses on what the introduction calls ‘an undoubted auteur who has been unjustifiably neglected’.<sup>84</sup> As Christine Gledhill argues, it was through Sirk that melodrama was initially conceptualised by a number of British critics in the 1970s – arguments were developed in relation to Sirk and then extended to the genre as a whole, though normally still as typified by other distinguished directors working within the 1950s family melodrama, such as Vincente Minnelli and Nicholas Ray.<sup>85</sup> Through the decade there is a movement in the work of Mulvey and others towards genre as object of interest. The uneasy compromise between auteur and genre is emblematised in the titles of Mulvey and Nowell-Smith’s SEFT weekend school papers, ‘Notes on Sirk and Melodrama’ and ‘Minnelli and Melodrama’; both essays make general points about Hollywood melodrama, but the examples are in each case limited almost entirely to a single director.<sup>86</sup>

*Douglas Sirk* and *Sirk on Sirk* are indicative of the surge of attention given to the director in British cinephile circles in the early 1970s, which also manifested itself in a special issue of *Screen* in 1971, from which a number of essays were

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<sup>83</sup> Mulvey, ‘Melodrama Inside and Outside the Home’, p. 67

<sup>84</sup> Jon Halliday and Laura Mulvey, ‘Introduction’, in *Douglas Sirk*, p. vi

<sup>85</sup> Christine Gledhill, ‘The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation’, in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, p. 7; see also Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 14

<sup>86</sup> In keeping with Mulvey’s usage, I use the term ‘melodrama’ throughout to refer primarily to the 1950s Hollywood domestic melodrama, rather than the broader melodramatic mode with roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and theatre that is influential across Hollywood cinema as a whole. For the latter, see Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama’, in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, pp. 43-50, originally published in *Monogram* 4 (1972), pp. 2-15; and Linda Williams, ‘Melodrama Revised’, in Nick Browne (ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 42-88

reprinted in the Edinburgh book.<sup>87</sup> To understand Mulvey's positions it is helpful to reflect on the reasons for this interest and on the elements that were foregrounded in the construction of 'Sirk' as an author. First, Sirk was seen as a European intellectual, with connections to earlier avant-garde movements, transplanted to Hollywood. Halliday and Mulvey write that '[t]here has probably never been anyone at work in Hollywood so familiar with the avant-garde theatre of Europe in the early decades of this century and also familiar with painting, poetry and music'.<sup>88</sup> For Mulvey, Sirk's name change from Detlef Sierck when he went to America was symbolic of the way he had assimilated this background into American cinema.<sup>89</sup> Second, Halliday and Paul Willemen drew attention to Sirk's left-wing credentials,<sup>90</sup> grounding an understanding of Sirk as an ironic critic of Eisenhower-era America.<sup>91</sup> In relation to these two points, Sirk's historical connection to Brecht was underscored,<sup>92</sup> and formed the foundation for the effectively Brechtian readings of Sirk by Willemen and Halliday. Willemen's argument for Sirkian 'distanciation' evidently borrows from Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*; likewise he employs the term 'boomerang image' from Bernard Dort's *Lecture de Brecht* for 'Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System';<sup>93</sup> Halliday, meanwhile, claims of Sirk's *Zu Neuen Ufern* (*To New Shores*, 1937) that 'clearly the main tradition to which it belongs is that of Brecht and Weill'.<sup>94</sup> In addition, Sirk's careful use of the language of cinema,

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<sup>87</sup> *Screen* 12:2 (Summer, 1971)

<sup>88</sup> Halliday and Mulvey, 'Introduction', p. vi; see also Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. xi and 8

<sup>89</sup> Mulvey, 'Unravelling the Puzzle', p. 17

<sup>90</sup> Jon Halliday, 'Notes on Sirk's German Films', p. 8, and Paul Willemen, 'Distanciation and Douglas Sirk', p. 64, both in *Screen* 12:2 (Summer, 1971); Paul Willemen, 'Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System', *Screen* 13:4 (Winter, 1972), p. 128

<sup>91</sup> Halliday (ed.), *Sirk on Sirk*, p. 98; Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, pp. 20-21

<sup>92</sup> Halliday (ed.), *Sirk on Sirk*, pp. 18-19 and 23-24; Willemen, 'Towards an Analysis', p. 128

<sup>93</sup> Willemen, 'Towards an Analysis', pp. 128-129

<sup>94</sup> Halliday, 'Notes on Sirk's German Films', p. 11. Kurt Weill was Brecht's collaborator on *The Threepenny Opera*

such as lighting and camera movement, made his films amenable to the kind of formalist, anti-thematic analysis that critics around *Screen* wished to carry out. Sam Rohdie, for instance, in his editorial in the *Screen* issue, speaks of how the meaning of Sirk's films 'must be gathered precisely by means of an analysis of formal procedures', and of how such an approach 'would "scandalise" the usual theme-orientated approach to film studies'.<sup>95</sup> One might also suggest that Sirk's willingness to discuss his aims and ideas in *Sirk on Sirk*, unlike many Hollywood directors, encouraged interest in his films, as perhaps did the praise for Sirk from a figure of the new European cinema like Fassbinder, whose highly complimentary essay on Sirk was published in *Douglas Sirk*.<sup>96</sup>

This background is worth noting since 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama' begins by reviewing such interpretations of Sirk:

It has been suggested that the interest of Hollywood 1950s melodrama lies primarily in the way that, by means of textual analysis, fissures and contradictions can be shown to be undermining the films' ideological coherence. These contradictions, whether on the level of form or of narrative incident, seem to save the films from belonging blindly to the bourgeois ideology which produced them. ('NSM', 41)<sup>97</sup>

As Mulvey indicates, Willemen's position consists – in typical *Screen* fashion – in seeing the director as a transgressor of the rules of the classic realist text, manipulating formal devices (irony, deliberate use of cliché, parody) to produce ideological contradiction: 'by altering the rhetoric of the bourgeois melodrama, through stylisation and parody, Sirk's films distanciate themselves from the

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<sup>95</sup> Sam Rohdie, 'Editorial', *Screen* 12:2 (Summer, 1971), p. 4; Halliday and Mulvey, 'Introduction', p. vi

<sup>96</sup> Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 'Six Films by Douglas Sirk', in *Douglas Sirk*, pp. 95-107

<sup>97</sup> A footnote makes clear that the works being alluded to are Willemen's 'Distanciation' and 'Towards an Analysis', and Steve Neale's 'Douglas Sirk', *Framework* 5 (Winter, 1976), pp. 16-18. The latter text recapitulates and reflects on Willemen's arguments

bourgeois ideology'.<sup>98</sup> In this way Sirk may be classified under Comolli and Narboni's 'category (e)', a director whose work initially appears to be a mere expression of the dominant ideology, but which on closer inspection impedes this ideology's functioning.<sup>99</sup>

Willemen and Halliday share the notion that Sirk *overcomes* the melodramatic content of his films. Both highlight the way Sirk's plots and subject matter were imposed on him.<sup>100</sup> In relation to *Imitation of Life*, for instance, Halliday speaks of Sirk 'fighting – and transcending – the universe of Fannie Hurst and Ross Hunter', the writer on whose novel the film is based and its producer, 'transform[ing] the awful story'.<sup>101</sup> There is a definite gendered aspect to this argument (all the essays in *Douglas Sirk* and in the *Screen* issue are by men, in fact), brought out by remarks such as Willemen's codedly disparaging allusion to 'the stories in women's weeklies' whose characteristic devices Sirk made use of,<sup>102</sup> or Halliday's explicitly pejorative comment that '[o]n the surface, [*All That*] *Heaven [Allows]* is a standard women's magazine weepie – mawkish, mindless and reactionary'.<sup>103</sup> Halliday does not make analogous judgments about the male-centric plots of the Sirk films he most admires, *Written on the Wind* (1956) and *The Tarnished Angels* (1957). Willemen and other male critics seem to recruit 'distanciation' to make the melodrama's 'feminine' subject matter (the domestic, motherhood, female desire) permissible, to place the 'female' material at a remove. Indeed, as Gledhill shows, Willemen, Halliday and others implicitly identify 'the female sphere' with bourgeois ideology

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<sup>98</sup> Willemen, 'Distanciation', p. 67

<sup>99</sup> Willemen, 'Distanciation', p. 67; Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, p. 17. Christine Gledhill provides a fuller account of this version of Sirk in 'The Melodramatic Field', pp. 6-9

<sup>100</sup> Willemen, 'Distanciation', p. 64; Halliday (ed.), *Sirk on Sirk*, p. 9

<sup>101</sup> Halliday (ed.), *Sirk on Sirk*, pp. 9 and 10

<sup>102</sup> Willemen, 'Distanciation', p. 66

<sup>103</sup> Halliday (ed.), *Sirk on Sirk*, p. 10

itself, in their ‘designation of the family as a bourgeois institution, the perceived materialisation of bourgeois ideology in these films in a sphere conventionally assigned to women – the home, family relations, domestic trivia, consumption, fantasy and romance, sentiment’.<sup>104</sup> The valorisation of the male auteur is achieved on the basis of the reduction of the ‘female’ genre.

Despite the leftist political impetus behind these arguments – which praise works such as *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Written on the Wind* and *Imitation of Life* for their ability to subtly undermine the complacencies of the Eisenhower-era society they might otherwise be seen to simply proffer to the audience – in opposing a level of reactionary, self-evident content to another of subversive formal strategies requiring decipherment, Willemen and Halliday postulate two audiences attuned to each level in a way that encodes class and gender. Willemen suggests, for example, ‘that there appears to be a discrepancy between the audience Sirk is aiming at and the audience which he knows will come to see his films’,<sup>105</sup> and that ‘[a]lthough the films were products of, for and about Eisenhower-America, they were misunderstood at that time. Sirk explained this in terms of the American audience’s failure to recognise irony [...] and the lack of a genuine film culture based on a theory of aesthetics’.<sup>106</sup> They counterpose the naïve mass audience watching one film in the 1950s, and the educated critic or theorist watching another in the 1970s, at the expense of the former.<sup>107</sup> As Gledhill notes, this audience, ‘which is implicated, identified and weeps’, is assumed (though never explicitly stated) to be female.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Gledhill, ‘The Melodramatic Field’, p. 12

<sup>105</sup> Willemen, ‘Distanciation’, p. 65

<sup>106</sup> Willemen, ‘Towards an Analysis’, p. 130

<sup>107</sup> Gledhill, ‘The Melodramatic Field’, p. 7; Neale, ‘Douglas Sirk’, p. 17

<sup>108</sup> Gledhill, ‘The Melodramatic Field’, p. 12



While Mulvey acknowledges that these preceding arguments have been generative, she suggests they have ‘been trapped in a kind of Chinese box’ (NSM, 41). Her own position is different. The first indications of it can be seen in ‘Fassbinder and Sirk’, published, significantly, in *Spare Rib*. Mulvey’s text is really about how Fassbinder brings out and extends the class politics of *All That Heaven Allows* while retaining the positive aspects of its sexual politics, articulating sexual, class and racial oppression and exploitation together – in terms of narrative, not style.<sup>109</sup> The fact that Mulvey’s first singly-authored text on Sirk was a review of Fassbinder is suggestive and fitting: Fassbinder was the only writer in *Douglas Sirk* to pick up on the feminist implications of Sirk’s films,<sup>110</sup> while in a recent interview Mulvey notes how Fassbinder understood the importance of the content of Sirk’s films, not only their form.<sup>111</sup>

A more detailed treatment of her position is given in ‘Notes on Sirk and Melodrama’. ‘Distanciation’, peripheral to the main argument in ‘Fassbinder and Sirk’,<sup>112</sup> disappears completely from the discussion. Instead, Mulvey directly challenges the understanding of ideology subtending the arguments of Willemsen and others. First, ideology, far from seeking to present itself as coherent and homogeneous, hence susceptible to a textual work that would open contradictions, is never coherent, always contradictory, and thus ‘searches for safety-valves for its own inconsistencies’. Second, ideological contradiction is not something hidden in melodrama, to be deciphered by the critic; rather, it is the genre’s explicit subject

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<sup>109</sup> Mulvey, ‘Fassbinder and Sirk’, pp. 47-48

<sup>110</sup> ‘Women think in Sirk’s films. Something which has never struck me with other directors. None of them. Usually women are always reacting, doing what women are supposed to do, but in Sirk they think. It’s something that has to be seen. It’s great to see women think. It gives one hope. Honestly.’ Fassbinder, ‘Six Films by Douglas Sirk’, p. 97

<sup>111</sup> Mulvey, ‘Unravelling the Puzzle’, p. 17. Mulvey’s interest in *Fear Eats the Soul*’s homage to Sirk is also significant when one looks at *Riddles of the Sphinx*’s similar homage

<sup>112</sup> Mulvey, ‘Fassbinder and Sirk’, p. 48

matter ('NSM', 41). Melodrama therefore plays an ambivalent role. Viewed negatively, it works as a safety valve, an aesthetic working-through of problems pertaining to the family, gender and so on, a controlled release of pent-up anger and frustration produced by exploitation and oppression, ultimately strengthening bourgeois, patriarchal ideology. However, because it picks up on subject matter usually ignored or repressed, playing out ideological contradiction as lived by characters, melodrama can stimulate recognition in women in a valuable way: 'a simple fact of recognition has aesthetic and political importance. There is a dizzy satisfaction in witnessing the way that sexual difference under patriarchy is fraught, explosive, and erupts dramatically into violence in its own private stamping-ground, the family' ('NSM', 42). A decisive political function is attributed to the female spectator's act of recognition, unlike the valorisation of its opposite, 'distanciation' (or, in alternative translations of the German term *Verfremdung* that make the opposition clearer, 'alienation' or 'estrangement'), in Willemsen. My chapter title 'Passionate Detachment', discussed in my introduction, therefore alludes not only to the interplay between criticism and advocacy in a text like 'The Two Avant-Gardes', described below, but to the simultaneous validation across 'Visual Pleasure' and Mulvey's texts on melodrama of both spectatorial distance and emotional investment.

The intrinsic ambivalence in Mulvey's account of melodrama is manifested in the way the multiple versions of the essay – not substantively different in their argument – sometimes diverge as to whether they give greater emphasis to the progressive or conservative aspects of more or less the same statement.<sup>113</sup> However

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<sup>113</sup> Compare, for instance: 'As women are an oppressed group, the small number of Hollywood films made with a female audience in mind, gain their strength from evoking contradictions rather than mimicking success' (from 'Douglas Sirk and Melodrama' in *Australian Journal of Screen Theory*, p. 30), to the rather less positive, 'Hollywood films made with a female audience in mind tell a story of

cautious, though, Mulvey's text begins a feminist reappropriation of melodrama, valuing the genre for precisely the reasons it has been historically neglected, i.e. its association with 'woman's domain', rather than seeking to valorise it (or a particular director) over and against this association.<sup>114</sup> Given this, the role of *mise en scène* in Sirk cannot be ironic subversion of the manifest content. Rather, Mulvey follows Elsaesser in seeing *mise en scène* as guiding the spectator as to the significance of plot events.<sup>115</sup> It 'provide[s] a transcendent, wordless commentary, giving abstract emotion spectacular form, contributing a narrative level that provides the action with a specific coherence. *Mise en scène*, rather than the undercutting of the actions and words of the story level, provides a central point of orientation for the spectator' ('NSM', 43). The preservation of a central place for *mise en scène* as, in Gledhill's phrase, 'the basis of melodramatic rhetoric',<sup>116</sup> is once more indicative of Mulvey's classical cinephile background, as is the text's publication in *Movie*.<sup>117</sup>

Mulvey makes a distinction between the family or 'masculine' melodrama, which 'examines tensions in the family; and between the sexes and generations', in which female characters are important but not the motor of the drama or centre of identification, exemplified by *Written on the Wind*, *The Tarnished Angels* or Minnelli's *Home from the Hill* (1960); and female point of view melodramas such as *All That Heaven Allows*, 'coloured by a female protagonist's point of view which provides a focus for identification' ('NSM', 42-43). The former tends towards the tragic. Mulvey compares them to Aeschylus, whose plays emphasise the negative

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contradiction, not reconciliation. Even if a heroine resists society's overt pressures, its unconscious laws catch up with her in the end.' ('NSM', 46)

<sup>114</sup> See Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field', pp. 1 and 10

<sup>115</sup> Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', pp. 50-52

<sup>116</sup> Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field', p. 5

<sup>117</sup> See Christine Gledhill, 'Melodrama', in Pam Cook (ed.), *The Cinema Book*, third edition (London: BFI, 2007), p. 316

consequences of the ‘overvaluation of virility’. All three films mentioned end with the death of a leading male character (‘NSM’, 42). The latter is more strictly melodramatic (‘NSM’, 43). For Mulvey, the first category, the family melodrama, is more or less able to effectively resolve, in the plot, the ‘irreconcilable social and sexual dilemmas’ it raises (‘NSM’, 46). In *Home from the Hill*, the exaggerated, ultra-phallic masculinity of Captain Hunnicutt (Robert Mitchum) paradoxically threatens the patriarchal order; by softening it, his son Rafe (George Peppard) allows its continuation, assuming the place of the father in a new family at the film’s end (‘NSM’, 42). In contrast, ‘having a female point of view dominating the narrative produces an excess which precludes satisfaction’ (‘NSM’, 46). Thus, we never find out in *All That Heaven Allows* if Ron recovers from his injury, nor if Cary is able to cope with the social sanctions of being with him. Regardless of whether the ending reties the ideological threads that the rest of the film loosened, melodrama’s strength ‘lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, the cloud of overdetermined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled, in the last five minutes, into a happy end’ (‘NSM’, 42-43). This echoes, in a political vein, Sirk himself, who says of *Written on the Wind* that he had to ‘paste on a happy end’.<sup>118</sup> Mulvey’s argument displaces previous valuations of particular Sirk films: where Halliday declared the more male-centric *Written on the Wind* and *The Tarnished Angels* to be the director’s best,<sup>119</sup> Mulvey makes *All That Heaven Allows* the central work in both ‘Fassbinder and Sirk’ and ‘Notes on Sirk and Melodrama’.

It should be clear that the difference between Mulvey’s argument that the genre’s positive possibilities reside in the female spectator’s recognition of her own lived ideological contradiction in what is represented on screen, and the claim of

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<sup>118</sup> Halliday (ed.), *Sirk on Sirk*, p. 119

<sup>119</sup> Halliday (ed.), *Sirk on Sirk*, p. 9

Willemsen and others that it lies in an esoteric subversive subtext revealed via critical exegesis, is primarily determined by the former's background in the women's movement. Historicising the theorisation of melodrama in her 1994 essay "It Will Be a Magnificent Obsession", Mulvey says that 'the sphere of the feminine had to find a voice which could provide critical commentary on its genre, the domestic melodrama. [...] Feminism would provide the voice and vocabulary which could transform the content aspect of the melodrama into material of significance'.<sup>120</sup> Indeed, the analysis of Sirk's work in this period that in many ways accords the most with Mulvey's also emanates from the women's movement: Ellen Keneshea's 1972 article in *Women and Film* discusses Sirk's characters and plots in relation to domesticity, social roles, the entrapment of the family and so on.<sup>121</sup> Mulvey's emphasis on content and female point of view, as well as her insistence on the co-existence of progressive and conservative potentials in the genre, lays the groundwork for feminist work on melodrama in the 1980s.<sup>122</sup>

This said, it is noticeable that Mulvey preserves the focus on a single privileged male auteur from earlier critics. By contrast, in the mid-1970s Pam Cook and Claire Johnston were turning to the work of a female director, Dorothy Arzner, who directed a number of melodramas.<sup>123</sup> Similarly, feminist critics would increasingly look at 'woman's films' by male directors less prestigious than Sirk,

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<sup>120</sup> Mulvey, "It Will Be a Magnificent Obsession", p. 122

<sup>121</sup> Ellen Keneshea, 'The Not So Tender Trap. Sirk: *There's Always Tomorrow* and *Imitation of Life*', *Women and Film* 1:2 (1972), pp. 51-55

<sup>122</sup> See, for instance, the recurring themes in the debate over *Stella Dallas* in *Cinema Journal* in the mid-1980s: Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama", *Cinema Journal* 24:1 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 22-23; E. Ann Kaplan, 'E. Ann Kaplan Replies to Linda Williams's "'Something Else Besides a Mother": *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama', *Cinema Journal* 24:2 (Winter, 1985), pp. 40-43; Patrice Petro and Carol Flinn, 'Patrice Petro and Carol Flinn on Feminist Film Theory', *Cinema Journal* 25:1 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 50-52, and E. Ann Kaplan, 'E. Ann Kaplan Replies', pp. 52-54 in the same issue

<sup>123</sup> Claire Johnston (ed.), *The Work of Dorothy Arzner: Towards a Feminist Cinema* (London: BFI, 1975)

often based on novels by women, such as *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942) or *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937).<sup>124</sup> In emphasising the importance of ‘female’ subject matter rather than authorial critique through film style, Mulvey could be seen to have pushed in this direction; however, the canon of ‘great directors’ associated with Mulvey’s 1960s cinephilia retains purchase here.

I stated in the previous section that melodrama must be seen in the context of ‘Visual Pleasure’: the female audience apparently assumed by the genre makes it a counter example or proving ground for Mulvey’s theses about the male spectator. Mulvey’s distinction between the female point of view melodrama and the family or masculine one implies that not all melodrama addresses itself to a female audience. The family melodrama primarily interested male critics such as Halliday, Elsaesser and Nowell-Smith; the female point of view melodrama, and the overlapping but not identical genre of the ‘woman’s film’,<sup>125</sup> is of particular interest to feminist criticism. The point is eloquently expressed by Mary Ann Doane, glossing Pam Cook’s questioning of ‘why does the women’s picture exist? There is no such thing as “the men’s picture,” specifically addressed to men; there is only “cinema,” and “the women’s picture,” a sub-group or category specially for women’.<sup>126</sup> In a passage bearing the imprint of ‘Visual Pleasure’, Doane comments that

The cinema in general, outside of the genre of the woman’s picture, constructs its spectator as the generic “he” of language. The masculine norm is purportedly asexual while sexually defined seeing is relegated to the woman. [...]

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<sup>124</sup> Noted by Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, p. 28. For instance, Lea Jacobs, ‘*Now Voyager*: Some Problems of Enunciation and Sexual Difference’, *Camera Obscura* 7 (Spring, 1981), pp. 89-104; Maria LaPlace, ‘Producing and Consuming the Woman’s Film: Discursive Struggle in *Now, Voyager*, in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, pp. 138-166; E. Ann Kaplan, ‘The Case of the Missing Mother’, *Heresies* 16 (1983); Williams, “‘Something Else’”

<sup>125</sup> For a discussion of the distinction, see Gledhill, ‘The Melodramatic Field’, pp. 34-35

<sup>126</sup> Pam Cook, ‘Melodrama and the Women’s Picture’, in Sue Aspinall and Sue Harper (eds.), *Gainsborough Melodrama*, BFI Dossier 18 (London: BFI, 1983), p. 17, quoted in Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 3

The woman's film is therefore in many ways a privileged site for the analysis of the given terms of female spectatorship and the inscription of subjectivity precisely because its address to a female viewer is particularly strongly marked.<sup>127</sup>

Accounts of melodrama by Elsaesser and Nowell-Smith argue that unlike, say, the western, melodrama's protagonists do not act upon the world but are acted upon by it,<sup>128</sup> implicitly inverting the argument of 'Visual Pleasure' that the male protagonist's role is 'the active one of advancing the story, making things happen' ('VPNC', 20). Nowell-Smith's text makes the connection particularly evident, since he stresses the mapping of activity and passivity onto the terms masculine and feminine: the protagonists of melodrama are usually women or men who are 'impaired' in their masculinity (in psychoanalytic terms, 'castrated'). Mulvey's argument that female figures of identification in melodrama tend to trouble narrative resolution, meanwhile, seems to parallel the claim in 'Visual Pleasure' that the figure of woman-as-spectacle disturbs the steady unfolding of narrative.

Just as Mulvey doesn't mention melodrama in 'Visual Pleasure', she makes no explicit link to the latter text in 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama'. This is despite the fact that the relation was clearly perceived by feminist critics writing about the maternal melodrama/woman's film in the aftermath of 'Visual Pleasure', for whom reference to the essay is almost ubiquitous.<sup>129</sup> Indeed, Mulvey's non-reference to melodrama in 'Visual Pleasure' opens her to attack from critics such as Andrew

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<sup>127</sup> Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p. 3

<sup>128</sup> Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', pp. 55-56; Nowell-Smith, 'Minnelli and Melodrama', p. 115

<sup>129</sup> See, for instance: Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, pp. 128-9; E. Ann Kaplan, 'Theories of Melodrama: A Feminist Perspective', *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 1:1 (Spring/Summer, 1983), p. 44; Janet Walker, 'Hollywood, Freud and the Representation of Women: Regulation and Contradiction, 1945-early 1960s', in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, p. 208; Williams, "'Something Else'", pp. 6-8

Britton, who offers the woman's film as evidence of the error of Mulvey's theses.<sup>130</sup> It is only later that Mulvey draws attention to the relationship between the two fields of enquiry, writing that '[i]n the melodrama, the woman's image, and how it is constructed for female spectators, assumes pre-given awareness of the voyeuristic tendency of Hollywood cinema and turns it upside down'.<sup>131</sup>

In this later text Mulvey argues that, as well as requiring the perspective brought by feminism, interest in melodrama was awaiting psychoanalysis, which 'would provide the concepts which could transform the "unspeakable" into the unconscious, transforming the stuffy kitschness of the melodrama into the stuff of dreams and desire'.<sup>132</sup> What is strange is that Mulvey's seventies writing on melodrama is not particularly psychoanalytic. The only substantive psychoanalytic passage in the reprint of 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama' in *Visual and Other Pleasures* is the account of the Sirkian family melodrama in terms of the male Oedipal trajectory ('NSM', 42-43). This is in contrast to the psychoanalytic tenor of almost all Mulvey's published work up to this point, and despite the fact that the melodrama's themes of family, sexuality, paternity, legitimacy and repressed emotion would seem ripe for it. Moreover, contemporaneous critics were drawing heavily on psychoanalysis. Elsaesser's 'Tales of Sound and Fury' uses the concepts of displacement and condensation from Freud's early works (1899's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and 1901's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*) to understand the genre's *mise en scène* and 'metaphoric images'.<sup>133</sup> Nowell-Smith's

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<sup>130</sup> Andrew Britton, 'A New Servitude: Bette Davis, *Now, Voyager*, and the Radicalism of the Woman's Film', *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), p. 41

<sup>131</sup> Mulvey, "It Will Be a Magnificent Obsession", pp. 130-131. See also my discussion in chapter five of 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"'

<sup>132</sup> Mulvey, "It Will Be a Magnificent Obsession", p. 122

<sup>133</sup> Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', p. 59



paper from the 1977 SEFT weekend school on melodrama, meanwhile, turns to ‘conversion hysteria’, translating Freud’s account of the energy attached to a repressed idea returning as bodily symptoms of the hysteric into the repressed desires and excess emotions of melodrama’s characters returning as symptoms on the body of the film: lighting, décor, camera movement, and so on.<sup>134</sup> The very frequent reference to Freud across a collection like *Home is Where the Heart is* indicates the way psychoanalysis would become central to film theory’s account of melodrama. One might venture the suggestion that Mulvey was more concerned at this point with indicating the feminist politics of recognition in relation to melodrama than with drawing out its psychoanalytic implications.

The links between melodrama and psychoanalysis, and between melodrama and the theses of ‘Visual Pleasure’, are explored less in Mulvey’s writings than in Mulvey and Wollen’s second film, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, released the same year as ‘Notes on Sirk and Melodrama’, to which I turn in the next chapter.

### **‘The Two Avant-Gardes’**

Wollen’s essay ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’ was published in 1975 in a special issue of the art magazine *Studio International* on ‘Avant-Garde Film in England and Europe’ that, as Kathryn Siegel notes, was a landmark publication for British experimental film.<sup>135</sup> Like ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, published the same year, ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’ is probably the author’s most widely-cited work, and just as

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<sup>134</sup> Nowell-Smith, ‘Minnelli and Melodrama’, p. 117

<sup>135</sup> Kathryn Siegel, ‘Conditions of Legibility: Reading and Writing the London Film-Makers’ Co-operative 1966-1976’, in Mark Webber (ed.), *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-Makers’ Co-operative 1966-1976* (London: LUX, 2016), p. 18. Peter Wollen, ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’, *Studio International* 190:978 (November/December 1975), pp. 171-175. Reprinted in *Readings and Writings*, pp. 92-104. References to this reprint are given in the text with the abbreviation ‘TAG’

with Mulvey's essay it had a decisive importance, shaping the critical – and, arguably, artistic – field in the years that followed.<sup>136</sup> Eschewing formalist accounts of cinematic experiment as a linear development of forms internal to the art, Wollen's essay proposes a political, historical and semiotic genealogy, establishing on it a program for contemporary film practice. As Catherine Lupton writes, the essay 'marked a watershed in the circulation and transformation of discourses of avant-gardism in film', functioning as one of two dominant paradigms for the conceptualisation of experimental film in Britain in this period, along with the 'Structural/Materialist film' advocated by Peter Gidal.<sup>137</sup> It continues to be cited in accounts and studies of experimental film and artists' moving image, though often as a historic document rather than a theoretical or critical lens.<sup>138</sup> What I especially wish to draw out in this section are the cinematic, critical and institutional contexts that frame and become manifest in 'The Two Avant-Gardes', the contradictions and equivocations in Wollen's text, the importance of Wollen's advocacy of a third

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<sup>136</sup> For a sample of the influence of 'The Two Avant-Gardes' in the years immediately following its publication, see its citation or reiteration in Mick Eaton, 'The Avant-Garde and Narrative: Two SEFT/London Film-Makers Co-op Day Schools', *Screen* 19:2 (Summer, 1978), p. 129; Janet Bergstrom and Constance Penley, 'The Avant-Garde: Histories and Theories', *Screen* 19:3 (Autumn, 1978), pp. 124-127; Constance Penley, 'The Camera: *Je/La Camera: Eye* (Babette Mangolte)', *Camera Obscura* 3-4 (Summer, 1979), p. 195; Felix Thompson, 'Notes on Reading of Avant-Garde Films: *Trapline, Syntax*', *Screen* 20:2 (Summer, 1979), pp. 107-108; Philip Drummond, 'Notions of Avant-Garde Cinema', in *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975* (London: Hayward Gallery/Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979), pp. 13-14; and Pam Cook, 'Teaching Avant-Garde Film: Notes Towards Practice', *Screen Education* 32/33 (Autumn/Winter 1979/1980), pp. 83-84 and 90-91. A note on the inside cover of *Undercut* 1 (March-April, 1981), published by the LFMC, speaks of the publication situating itself between the two avant-gardes

<sup>137</sup> Catherine Lupton, 'Discourses of Avant-Gardism in British Film Culture 1966-1979', PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 1996, pp. 58-59 and 56. See Peter Gidal, 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film', *Studio International* 190:978 (November/December 1975), pp. 189-196, reprinted in Peter Gidal, *Flare Out: Aesthetics 1966-2016*, ed. Peter Gidal and Mark Webber (London: The Visible Press, 2016), pp. 37-68

<sup>138</sup> For its historic importance, see A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (London: BFI, 1999), p. 93, and David Curtis, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* (London: BFI, 2007), p. 76. For contemporary citations and engagements, see Christa Blümlinger, 'The History of Cinema, as Experience', *Radical Philosophy* 192 (July-August, 2015), p. 15, and Dan Kidner, 'To Independent Filmmakers: Stephen Dwoskin and "the International Free Cinema"', *Screen* 57:1 (Spring, 2016), pp. 95-102

avant-garde to overcome the dichotomy he identifies, and the centrality of feminist filmmaking to this third avant-garde.

The basic contention of 'The Two Avant-Gardes' is well-known: the uneven development of film history has resulted in two different avant-garde currents, whose rapprochement is an urgent task for a radical cinematic practice. In order to understand Wollen's argument, it is helpful to begin with the historical and ontological claim about modernism that grounds it. Replaying the 1972 Conclusion to *Signs and Meaning*, this time assigning the pioneering role within modernism specifically to Cubism, Wollen states in 'The Two Avant-Gardes' that Braque and Picasso's discoveries marked

a critical semiotic shift, a changed concept and practice of sign and signification, which we can now see to have been the opening-up of a space, a disjunction between signifier and signified and a change of emphasis from the problem of signified and reference, the classic problem of realism, to that of signifier and signified within the sign itself. ('TAG', 95)

According to Wollen's Saussurean perspective, the new problematic brought into being by Cubism played out differently across the arts. In painting, Cubism's bracketing of reference in order to concentrate on signifier-signified relations underwent radical inflection in the movements that came afterwards; having fissured signifier from signified, painting proceeded to expunge the latter, leading to 'an art of pure signifiers detached from meaning as much as from reference' ('TAG', 95).<sup>139</sup> In contrast, verbal art (poetry, prose and theatre), even in its modernist form, always held onto and privileged the signified. There modernism 'could be interpreted in terms of the expansion of subject-matter, new narrative techniques

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<sup>139</sup> A similar conceptualisation of Cubism is articulated in Victor Burgin, 'Modernism in the *Work of Art*', *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 18

(stream of consciousness) or play on the paradoxes of meaning and reference (Pirandellism)'. Sound poetry, for Wollen, is the exception proving this rule, since its experiments in eliminating the signified in the same way as abstract painting were frequently made by painters or writers closely affiliated with painters ('TAG', 95). In theatre, modernist innovations were primarily in set design and costume – that is, decorative ('TAG', 95-96).

Film's status as a mixed art form, Wollen argues, meant that it could accommodate both sides of the post-Cubist split. The painterly modernist concerns fed into the abstract film of artists like Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling, and the 'deformation of conventional photographic imagery' seen in the works of a figure like Man Ray, which worked against the denotative, representational capacity of film. These were 'attempts to extend the scope of painting, to move outside the confines of the canvas, to introduce the dimension of time, to use light directly as well as colour' ('TAG', 93-94). In contrast, literary and dramatic modernist considerations defined the work of Soviet directors such as Eisenstein, Vertov and Alexander Dovzhenko, 'whose films were clearly avant-garde but in a different sense' ('TAG', 94). This second avant-garde was content-led, understanding signifiers as instruments, although also calling for their transformation. New signifieds – brought about, for instance, by the dawn of a revolutionary society – impelled a reinvention of signifiers ('TAG', 98-99). Speaking of Eisenstein's *Strike*, Wollen writes that '[t]here is no doubt that the dramaturgy is modernist rather than traditional – the crowd as hero, typage, *guignol* – but these are not features that can be attributed to a break with rather than a renovation of classical theatre. They are modes of achieving a heightened emotional effect or presenting an idea with unexpected vividness or force' ('TAG', 98). Eisenstein's emphasis on the signified

is encapsulated in his famous negative assessment of Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* as 'formalist jackstraws and unmotivated camera mischief' ('TAG', 98).<sup>140</sup> (Despite his positioning in the second avant-garde, Vertov emerges in Wollen's essay as a liminal, ambiguous figure, the forerunner of both *cinema-verité* and structural film, pitched between 'an ideology of photographic realism and one of formal innovation and experiment' ('TAG', 98).) Dialogue between the two avant-garde currents only came at the end of the 1920s, for instance when Eisenstein and Richter met, too late for any substantial interchange to occur ('TAG', 94).

The same divide, between formalist and content-driven strategies, Wollen argues, structures contemporary practice. On the one hand, there is the 'Co-op movement', represented in Europe by filmmakers such as Peter Gidal, Malcolm Le Grice (both associated with the London Film-Makers' Co-op) and Klaus Wyborny, and in the USA by the 'New American Cinema' (Hollis Frampton, Ken Jacobs and others, although Wollen does not mention them by name). Such filmmaking is grounded in the concerns – if not necessarily the official institutions – of art, though it has moved beyond a painterly problematic characteristic of its earlier iteration, to the investigation of the materials and codes peculiar to film itself. Thus, Wollen writes, 'Gidal's work has foregrounded and been in a sense "about" focus; Le Grice's work has foregrounded and been in a sense "about" printing or projection' ('TAG', 97). The second current is represented in contemporary cinema by filmmakers such as Godard, Huillet and Straub, Marcel Hanoun and Miklós Jancsó, for whom language and narrative provide central points of orientation. As Wollen describes, though there is contact between the two groupings, they differ in their 'aesthetic assumptions, institutional framework, type of financial support, type of

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<sup>140</sup> Quoting Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram', in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York and London: Harvest/HBJ: 1977), p. 43

critical backing, historical and cultural origin' (TAG, 92). The first avant-garde generally works with 16mm, often in shorter form, and is characterised by an artisanal mode of production in which a single artist carries out every element of film production, whereas the second favours 35mm features, working in a slightly more commercial context that sometimes includes famous actors, though these distinctions are not firmly fixed (TAG, 92, 103).

The fundamental contradiction of 'The Two Avant-Gardes' is between its *critical* objective of producing an artistic and semiotic genealogy of avant-garde film, and its *polemical* desire to clarify the field, to draw battle-lines in the present in a way that concurs with Wollen's argument in his 1972 Surrealism essay that the early twentieth-century avant-gardes faltered because 'battle-lines were never clearly drawn'.<sup>141</sup> The history it lays out is characterised by strategic evasions and omissions because of its aim of intervening directly in British film culture in 1975. This tension is more acute than in 'Godard and Counter Cinema', which expressed a similar balance of forces, since the analysis of 'The Two Avant-Gardes' ranges much more widely, across cinematic practices and historical periods rather than being confined to one filmmaker, hence the potential for the argument to more reductively represent the material at hand, despite Wollen's cautions at the beginning that not all experimental film can be fitted into his schema, giving the example of Jackie Raynal as an experimental filmmaker in neither avant-garde ('TAG', 92).

Taking the Soviet directors, for example, it is clear that Eisenstein is an important reference point not only for the second avant-garde but also for figures in

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<sup>141</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Surrealism', *7 Days* 11 (12 January 1972), p. 20

the USA like Frampton and Brakhage.<sup>142</sup> Vertov's writings were translated in *Film Culture* – generally seen as an organ of the New American Cinema – as early as 1962,<sup>143</sup> with a long article on Kuleshov, whose picture appeared on the cover, in 1967.<sup>144</sup> (I leave the writing of Annette Michelson to one side here, since her importance for 'The Two Avant-Gardes' is described below.) The dualistic model also tends to marginalise other strands of filmmaking. As J. Hoberman notes, 'The Two Avant-Gardes' neglects non-European directors such as Glauber Rocha and Santiago Alvarez,<sup>145</sup> producing a version of film history centring North America and Europe.<sup>146</sup> The absence of Surrealist, Lettrist and Situationist cinema also speaks to Wollen's desire to avoid examples that could compromise the compartmentalisation of 'The Two Avant-Gardes'. For these interrelated movements are characterised by interactions between painters and poets, and the co-existence of their concerns. While Wollen may not have seen any Lettrist or Situationist cinema by 1975, the omission of *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1929), arguably the most famous avant-garde film ever, can only be understood in terms of the way its emphasis on both content (dream, the unconscious) and formal possibilities in themselves (shocking, dissociative montage) blurs Wollen's distinctions. Wollen also puts to one side liminal figures who mixed avant-garde and commercial

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<sup>142</sup> See Hollis Frampton, 'Letter to the Editor, *Artforum*' and 'Talking about *Magellan*: An Interview', *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters*, ed. Bruce Jenkins (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 163 and 236; for Brakhage see the lecture on Eisenstein in *The Brakhage Lectures* (No location given: Ubu Classics, 2004), pp. 56-75 (originally published by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1972), and Hollis Frampton, 'Stan and Jane Brakhage, Talking', *Artforum* 11:5 (January, 1973), pp. 72-76

<sup>143</sup> *Film Culture* 25 (Summer, 1962)

<sup>144</sup> *Film Culture* 44 (Spring, 1967)

<sup>145</sup> J. Hoberman, 'After Avant-Garde Film', in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 68

<sup>146</sup> Although Wollen elsewhere acknowledged their importance. Rocha was listed as a 'post-Godard' director in the rehearsal of 'The Two Avant-Gardes' in the 1972 Conclusion to *Signs and Meaning* (*SM*, 135). Alvarez's *79 Springs* (1969) was shown at the 1976 Edinburgh event organised by Wollen and Field. See documents reproduced in *Shoot Shoot Shoot*, pp. 242-245

filmmaking, for instance Marcel L'Herbier, for whom Léger made sets for *L'Inhumaine*.<sup>147</sup>

Wollen himself seems to recognise that there is an unresolved tension between the essay's dualistic logic and the more complex field that strains against it, as we can see in the essay's presentation of geography and politics. Wollen argues that the first avant-garde has as its centre of gravity New York, writing that 'New York is clearly the capital of the Co-op movement' ('TAG', 93)). The second avant-garde, meanwhile, looks to Paris, embodying 'May '68 and film theory' as Wollen later put it.<sup>148</sup> At the same time, the two avant-gardes cannot simply be identified with North America vs. Europe since filmmakers of both kinds exist in Europe ('TAG', 93). As Wollen describes it in 1981, geography was an important footnote, but not the main argument.<sup>149</sup> Similarly, Wollen states that explicit political subject matter is more common in the second avant-garde ('TAG', 101). At the same time, he attempts to head-off any simplistic interpretation of his argument in terms of formalism vs. politics, as Lupton notes, stating that filmmakers of the first avant-garde like Gidal, for instance, make political claims for their work, while conversely, defenders of Godard or Huillet and Straub stress the importance of formal avant-gardism in order to differentiate their work from more aesthetically conservative left-wing filmmakers like Gillo Pontecorvo (*The Battle of Algiers*, 1966) or Marin Karmitz (*Coup pour coup*, 1972), 'a line of argument which, unless it is thought through carefully or stopped arbitrarily at some safe point, leads inevitably straight into the positions of the other avant-garde' ('TAG', 101).<sup>150</sup> The

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<sup>147</sup> See Standish D. Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 75-76

<sup>148</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Avant-Gardes: Europe and America', *Framework*, 14 (Spring, 1981), p. 9

<sup>149</sup> Wollen, 'The Avant-Gardes: Europe and America', p. 9

<sup>150</sup> Lupton, 'Discourses of Avant-Gardism', 63-64



binary model of ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’, then, constantly forces Wollen into reductive oppositions that he has to keep trying to escape. (Later interpretations have not always been able to escape these.)<sup>151</sup>

The last manoeuvre in Wollen’s argument is his assertion that ‘the two avant-gardes should be confronted and juxtaposed’ to produce a third (‘TAG’, 104). Up to this point, the essay could be read as merely the reiteration of binaries found in his work since the late 1960s: the structural antinomies in Hawks and Ford; the oppositions between *auteur* and *metteur en scène*, composition and performance, *de jure* and *de facto* criticisms; the antitheses that structured ‘Godard and Counter Cinema’. Yet Wollen advocates the overcoming of the dualism he describes. (Later glosses of ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’ have tended to accentuate the essay’s division of experimental film into two avant-garde strains at the expense of Wollen’s demand for the end of this bifurcation.) The shortcomings of each side can be supplemented by the strengths of the other, as Wollen notes with reference to Godard:

In *Le Gai Savoir*, Juliet Berto says towards the end that half the shots are missing from the film, and Jean-Pierre Léaud replies that they will be shot by other film-makers: Bertolucci, Straub, Glauber-Rocha. We can now see how wrong Godard was in some of his judgements – the shots missing from his film could be supplied by the other avant-garde – and it is not clear that he has ever realized this. (‘TAG’, 103-104)

Despite this criticism, Godard has gone the furthest towards a film practice that co-articulates signifier and signified, ‘work[ing] within the space opened up by the disjunction and dislocation of signifier and signified’ (TAG, 99), a film practice ‘about the possibility of meaning itself, about generating new types of meaning’

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<sup>151</sup> For instance, see Cook’s reference to the essay’s ‘opposition between formalism and politics’, in ‘Teaching Avant-Garde Film’, p. 83; and P. Adams Sitney’s statement that Wollen ‘called for a synthesis of the energy of the American avant-garde cinema and the politics of a number of European and Japanese feature films’, telescoping the formal/political distinction and the North America/Europe one. P. Adams Sitney, ‘Letter’, *Framework* 18 (January, 1982), p. 57

(‘TAG’, 100). In this sense, Godard has found a way back to the original Cubist break (‘TAG’, 100). Yet the convergence is also visible from the other direction, as filmmakers like Malcolm Le Grice move away from the ‘purist’, painterly concerns traditionally characteristic of the first avant-garde, towards a version of modernism characterised by intertextuality favoured by Wollen (TAG, 102).<sup>152</sup> (The theoretical grounding and implications of the claims of ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’ are developed by Wollen in “‘Ontology” and “Materialism” in Film’, discussed in chapter four.)

Like Godard, Wollen’s own origins are in the second avant-garde. He had written dedicated studies of filmmakers from its incarnation in the 1920s (Eisenstein) and the 1960s/1970s (Godard), and shared a background with the second avant-garde in the *Cahiers du cinéma*/Parisian version of cinephilia. His early attitude to the US underground, he himself admitted, had been negative.<sup>153</sup> Yet Wollen evidently desired to break out beyond this and open himself up to the other tradition. In 1975, Wollen organised a small ‘North American Avant-Garde’ strand at the Edinburgh Film Festival.<sup>154</sup> ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’ was published in an art magazine in the company of those filmmakers and critics Wollen labelled ‘first avant-garde’: David Curtis, Gidal, Birgit Hein, Le Grice, Annabel Nicolson. Wollen participated in a seminar at the LFMC in February 1976 on ‘Theory of Avant-Garde Film Practice’, along with Gidal and Le Grice, evidence of a desire to open up a dialogue with the first avant-garde.<sup>155</sup> In his 1981 reflection on ‘The Two Avant-

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<sup>152</sup> Intertextuality, of course, is a concern of the first avant-garde stretching back at least to structural film of the late 1960s, as evidenced by Ken Jacobs’s *Tom, Tom, the Piper’s Son* (1969), with its refilming and analysis of a pre-classical short

<sup>153</sup> Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, ‘Written Discussion’, *Afterimage* 6 (Summer, 1976), pp. 34-35

<sup>154</sup> 29<sup>th</sup> *Edinburgh International Film Festival* (1975 programme), p. 2. Wollen’s interest in experimental film was probably fostered by the 1970 International Underground Film Festival and the 1973 Festival of International Avant-Garde Film, both in London and organised by Simon Field and David Curtis, and the screening of works at the Edinburgh Film Festival in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

<sup>155</sup> See documentation in *Shoot Shoot Shoot*, pp. 231-241

Gardes’, Wollen avers that one of his express intentions in calling for the encounter between the two avant-garde strands had been to ‘push the magazine *Screen*’ – a journal of card-carrying second avant-gardists – ‘with which I was associated, away from a univocal “Parisianism”, towards a more cosmopolitan stance’, i.e. towards a recognition of the validity and interest of the New York axis.<sup>156</sup> Indeed, in the 1974 *Screen* interview on *Penthesilea*, Wollen had defended the North American avant-garde against criticism from Johnston and Willemen.<sup>157</sup> Thus, one should not overstate Wollen’s allegiance to the second avant-garde. Lupton has convincingly argued that Rodowick misinterprets Wollen as identifying Godard’s work with the synthesis of the two avant-gardes, and this synthesis itself as the ‘counter cinema’ described by Wollen three years previously.<sup>158</sup> As she clarifies, this underplays Wollen’s criticism of Godard in both essays, and generates a contradiction – for if the two avant-gardes had already been united in Godard, why would Wollen speak of this synthesis as a project still to be undertaken?<sup>159</sup> Rodowick also misses, we might add, Wollen’s remarks that Godard, and indeed Huillet and Straub, have stalled in their advance since the late 1960s (TAG, 103).

‘The Two Avant-Gardes’ registers the impact of North American structural film, and of experimental films made in Britain from the late 1960s onwards, on a politicised, film theoretical tradition with cinephilic origins. In addition, in its demand for the conscious interface of the two traditions in a ‘third avant-garde’, it echoes, anticipates and encourages an embryonic cinematic mode. Wollen is, in a

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<sup>156</sup> Wollen, ‘The Avant-Gardes: Europe and America’, p. 9. See similar criticism of *Screen* in Peter Gidal, ‘Theory and Definition’, pp. 63-65

<sup>157</sup> Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, ‘Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’ (interview with Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen), *Screen*, 15:3 (Autumn 1974), p. 127

<sup>158</sup> Rodowick writes that ‘Godard’s work is thus understood as offering a third direction in the history of the cinematic avant-gardes; i.e., what Wollen had already termed *counter-cinema*’. Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 55

<sup>159</sup> Lupton, ‘Discourses of Avant-Gardism’, pp. 66-68

sense, reading the signs of the third avant-garde's coming into being. This third avant-garde was 'signposted by the work of Yvonne Rainer in the US and Chantal Akerman in Europe'.<sup>160</sup> Akerman, while often assimilated to a European tradition, was in New York in the early 1970s, and her films of that time (*Hotel Monterey* and 1972's *La Chambre*) owe a significant amount to Michael Snow and Andy Warhol.<sup>161</sup> Rainer, conversely, was from a background in New York dance but came under the influence of Godard.<sup>162</sup> Both were mentioned as an influence by Mulvey and Wollen in 1974.<sup>163</sup> Mulvey and Wollen's own works are signalled at the end of the essay when Wollen states he is 'writing now as a film-maker' ('TAG', 104). Wollen later declared that *Riddles of the Sphinx* was 'conceived of as an attempt to combine the two avant-gardes',<sup>164</sup> and indeed the film's work on the image with a motion analyser projector and optical colouring draws from the first, while its use of direct address to camera and its schematic, Brechtian narrative suggests the second.<sup>165</sup>

The films under discussion here are those that Noel Carroll would dub 'The New Talkies', works of the late 1970s and early 1980s that shift from a structural film fascinated with materials and perception, to a post-structural film interested in *signification*.<sup>166</sup> These works focus the analysis of language of late structural film but also seek to 'say something'; their provenance is predominantly European but

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<sup>160</sup> Wollen, 'The Avant-Gardes: Europe and America', p. 9

<sup>161</sup> The influence of Snow and Warhol on Akerman is a frequent refrain in Yvonne Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), for instance pp. 3 and 44

<sup>162</sup> See, for instance, Noel Carroll and Yvonne Rainer, 'Interview with a Woman Who...', *Millennium Film Journal* 7-9 (Fall, 1980/81), p. 57

<sup>163</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons'

<sup>164</sup> Wollen, 'The Avant-Gardes: Europe and America', p. 9. See also Sitney, 'Letter' and Wollen's reply in the same issue, p. 58, about the link between his writings and films

<sup>165</sup> Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'Riddles of the Avant-Garde' (interview with Don Ranvaud), *Framework* 9 (Winter 1978-79), pp. 30 and 31; John Dawson and Sean Tait, 'Interview: Wollen', *On Film* 7 (Winter, 1977), p. 34

<sup>166</sup> Carroll and Rainer, 'Interview with a Woman Who', p. 37

they frequently incorporate devices prevalent in North American avant-garde film of the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>167</sup> Similarly, J. Hoberman groups Mulvey and Wollen, Jackie Raynal, Akerman, Rainer and Babette Mangolte as filmmakers ‘steeped in issues of narrativity, spectatorship, identification, sexual difference and visual pleasure’.<sup>168</sup> As Lupton argues, despite highlighting the centrality of Rainer and Akerman to ‘third avant-gardism’ later on, Wollen does not explicitly acknowledge here that this situates feminist works as the privileged exemplar of the third avant-garde, works that have best integrated language, politics, intertextuality, formal experiment and reflexivity.<sup>169</sup> However, reflecting in 1981, Wollen writes that regarding the ‘project of a film semiotics capable of dealing with the problems of the avant-garde’, it was in the area of feminist film-making and feminist film theory that the line was best held’. He continues by saying that feminism ‘demanded a critique of image and narrative in dominant forms of cinema which inflected it towards the avant-garde. As yet there are only the beginnings of a breakdown of the division into two avant-gardes and separation of avant-garde from theoretical work, but it is in and in relation to feminist film that the convergence is most marked.’<sup>170</sup> The ‘Two Avant-Gardes’ is therefore closely related to Mulvey’s polemic for a feminist counter-cinema in ‘Visual Pleasure’ and her later expansion of these ideas in ‘Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde’, as I show in chapter four.

If the two paragraphs above indicated the influence of contemporaneous film practice, the second context in which ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’ should be situated is criticism and theory. Wollen’s arguments are not entirely original – Deke

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<sup>167</sup> Carroll and Rainer, ‘Interview with a Woman Who’, pp. 37-38

<sup>168</sup> Hoberman, ‘After Avant-Garde Film’, p. 67

<sup>169</sup> Lupton, ‘Discourses of Avant-Gardism’, p. 69.

<sup>170</sup> Wollen, ‘The Avant-Gardes: Europe and America’, p. 10

Dusinberre speaks of the essay as ‘distilling’ ideas already in the air.<sup>171</sup> As Lupton notes, *Afterimage*, in which Wollen had published, foretokened his argument through ‘its insistent presentation of both “experimental” and “political” discourses of avant-garde film’.<sup>172</sup> The 1972 issue titled ‘For a New Cinema’, carried an editorial by Peter Sainsbury in which the divergent practices of Frampton and Godard were brought together under the banner of an ‘epistemological’ film practice.<sup>173</sup> Even more significant is Noël Burch’s article ‘A New French Cinema’ in the same issue. Burch begins from the mutual antagonism between the New American Cinema and avant-garde French filmmaking that Wollen would register three years later (‘TAG’, 92).<sup>174</sup> Burch adumbrates various factors leading to a state of affairs familiar from Wollen, the simultaneous existence of two groupings, one in each country. In the USA there is ‘a cinema of the tabula rasa, recognising only the most tenuous roots in film history and turning for its inspiration to the most advanced painting, dance and music’; in France, a cinema ‘explicitly attached to the high tradition of composite film (narrative *and* abstract) that flourished during the twenties and early thirties in France, Russia and Germany’ and ‘conscious of the ethical, cultural and political need for a *critique* of the illusionist, alienating cinema’.<sup>175</sup> Burch points to the influence of Brecht and the linguistic predilections of this second cinema, its ‘verbal formulations of theoretical problems’.<sup>176</sup> Concluding, he asserts the need for ‘a more serious confrontation between new film making and criticism of France and the United States’, suggesting London as ‘an aptly neutral

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<sup>171</sup> Quoted in *Shoot Shoot Shoot*, p. 231

<sup>172</sup> Lupton, ‘Discourses of Avant-Gardism’, p. 264

<sup>173</sup> Peter Sainsbury, ‘Editorial’, *Afterimage* 4 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 2-3

<sup>174</sup> Noël Burch, ‘A New French Cinema’, *Afterimage* 4, p. 21

<sup>175</sup> Burch, ‘New French Cinema’, p. 22

<sup>176</sup> Burch, ‘New French Cinema’, pp. 22 and 24

territory for this encounter',<sup>177</sup> anticipating Wollen's call for the mediation of the two avant-gardes and his emphasis on Britain as a privileged location for this.<sup>178</sup>

Several years before Burch's essay, Annette Michelson had laid out the rudiments of these ideas in 1966's 'Film and the Radical Aspiration'. There, Michelson gestured to the 1920s, when a confluence of the radical aesthetics of modernism and the political aspirations of revolutionaries of the left seemed possible, only to be diverted by sound, the industrialisation of the industry and Stalinism. In the same essay, Michelson identifies a contemporary 'divergence of radicalisms' – two differently evolved contemporary strands, one centred in France, one in North America.<sup>179</sup> A few years later Michelson finds evidence of their convergence led by Godard, who 'has, as it were, *backed into* the work and theoretical positions of the American independents'.<sup>180</sup> Michelson's trajectory, as Wollen realised, showed parallels with his own, with her prehistory of Paris-based cinephilia in the 1950s and 1960s, her excavation of the work of Vertov and Eisenstein and attempts to find connections between North American experimental cinema and the European 'post-Brechtian aesthetic' in the 1970s. Both Michelson and *Afterimage* are mentioned by Wollen in 1976 as indicative of the increasing intersection of the two avant-gardes (OM, 223n40).

The third context is institutional. Crucial here was the newly formed Independent Film-Makers' Association (IFA), an umbrella organisation founded in 1974 under which independent filmmakers from vastly different backgrounds,

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<sup>177</sup> Burch, 'New French Cinema', p. 25

<sup>178</sup> Wollen speaks of the desire to confront the two avant-gardes as 'a characteristically British ambition perhaps'. Wollen, 'The Avant-Gardes: Europe and America', p. 9

<sup>179</sup> Annette Michelson, 'Film and the Radical Aspiration', in P. Adams Sitney, *Film Culture: An Anthology* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1971), pp. 407 and 409-410, originally in *Film Culture* 42 (Fall, 1966)

<sup>180</sup> Annette Michelson, 'Screen/Surface: The Politics of Illusionism', *Artforum* 11:1 (September 1972), p. 62

united by their opposition to dominant institutions and mainstream cinematic forms, could enter into dialogue and organise for shared goals.<sup>181</sup> Wollen writes:

I was laying the theoretical foundations I felt were necessary for the Independent Film-Makers['] Association, recently established in Britain. [...] The design was that the IFA should be able to bring together "militant" (Newsreel, Cinema Action) film makers with "formalist" (Co-op) film makers. For this, the old slogan of "new content, new forms" needed reviving and amplifying.<sup>182</sup>

Similarly, the First Festival of British Independent Cinema in Bristol in 1975 (at which *Penthesilea* was screened) could be seen as a kind of two avant-gardes in film-programming practice.<sup>183</sup> Wollen's essay seeks to systematise and energise this convergence, providing a historical genealogy for British independent cinema, despite the international range of examples put into play in the text. Indeed, the following year Wollen and Simon Field, editor of *Afterimage*, organised the 'International Forum on Avant-Garde Film' at the Edinburgh Film Festival, taking 'The Two Avant-Gardes' as its impetus.<sup>184</sup> Like the Bristol festival, films from both traditions were shown and filmmakers and critics from each met on ostensibly neutral terrain.<sup>185</sup> As Lupton writes, the idea was to 'permit fruitful exchanges to

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<sup>181</sup> See Margaret Dickinson, 'A Short History', in Margaret Dickinson (ed.), *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90* (London: BFI, 1999), pp. 48-61; Sylvia Harvey, 'The "Other Cinema" in Britain: Unfinished Business in Oppositional and Independent Film, 1929-1984', in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986), p. 238; Sheila Whitaker, 'Declarations of Independence', in Martin Auty and Nick Roddick (eds.), *British Cinema Now* (London: BFI, 1985), pp. 85-86

<sup>182</sup> Wollen, 'The Avant-Gardes: Europe and America', p. 9

<sup>183</sup> David Curtis, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain*, p. 19; see also the programme poster in *Shoot Shoot Shoot*, p. 207

<sup>184</sup> L.M. [Lynda Myles], 'International Forum on Avant-Garde Film', *30<sup>th</sup> Edinburgh International Film Festival* (1976 programme), pp. 5-6. Wollen's essay was reprinted in the publication accompanying the event, *Edinburgh '76 Magazine* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival, 1976), pp. 77-86.

<sup>185</sup> The participants were Chantal Akerman, Adriano Apra, Raymond Bellour, Ben Brewster, Victor Burgin, Ian Christie, Regina Cornwell, Serge Daney, Simon Field, Hollis Frampton, Peter Gidal, Birgit Hein, Claire Johnston, Marc Karlin, Malcolm Le Grice, Anthony McCall, Annette Michelson, Constance Penley, Yvonne Rainer, Paul Sharits, Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland and Peter Wollen. Panels were on the topics of 'The Concept of the Avant-Garde', 'The Soviet Avant-Garde of the 20s', 'The Avant-Garde and Language', 'The Avant-Garde and Politics', 'The Avant-Garde and Narrative'. See the documents reproduced in *Shoot Shoot Shoot*, pp. 242-245. For the perceived



take place between the different groups which had been marked out by the agenda set in Wollen's essay'.<sup>186</sup>

As Lupton perceives, the essay's direct intervention into this very specific context offers an explanation for its lack of attention to the material constituents of the schism between the two avant-gardes.<sup>187</sup> Wollen's text thinks through what it might mean artistically to bring together the two avant-gardes; at the same time, in the British film culture that provides the essay's background, organisations such as the IFA were trying to practically work through what this objective entailed at a material, institutional level. In consequence, although the text does mention such economic and organisational questions, it does not give them sustained consideration. As David Andrews points out, the essay's focus on signifier and signified occults the fact that the two avant-gardes are not parallel and equal strands in a material sense.<sup>188</sup> The first avant-garde (whatever distinctions one might choose to emphasise within it) has 'an inarguable institutional reality of its own' – it has created its own distributors, exhibition spaces, equipment-sharing facilities, and so on.<sup>189</sup> The second, in contrast, has a less clear-cut institutional existence, being a radical sub-sector of a larger arthouse cinema; its separation from this larger cinema is less institutional than 'critical, evaluative, and art historical'.<sup>190</sup> Such differences are not extensively explored by Wollen, whose interest is the discursive and aesthetic distinctions and convergences between the two avant-gardes.

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successes and failures of the International Forum, see Donald MacPherson, 'Edinburgh Film Festival 1976', and Ben Brewster, 'Structural Film Anthology', both in *Screen* 17:4 (Winter, 1976), pp. 105-111 and 117-120

<sup>186</sup> Lupton, *Discourses of Avant-Gardism*, p. 249

<sup>187</sup> Lupton, *Discourses of Avant-Gardism*, p. 63

<sup>188</sup> David Andrews, 'Revisiting "The Two Avant-Gardes"', *Jump Cut* 52 (2010), online at [http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/andrews2A\\_Gs/index.html](http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/andrews2A_Gs/index.html) (accessed 9 January, 2018)

<sup>189</sup> Andrews, 'Revisiting "The Two Avant-Gardes"'

<sup>190</sup> Andrews, 'Revisiting "The Two Avant-Gardes"'. The problems of distribution faced by filmmakers like Huillet and Straub and the Dziga Vertov Group are perhaps symptomatic, however, of their increasing separation from dominant cinematic institutions

These contextual matters also indicate how in re-applying Wollen's model there is the perpetual danger of reifying a set of contingent categories, superimposing a polemically simplified survey produced in the conjuncture of the oppositional British film culture of 1975 onto other times and places, the division of the two avant-gardes continually *reproduced* by virtue of the model rather than *discovered* in reality. Wollen's essay has often had the paradoxical effect of propagating a schism in the avant-garde through discursive reinforcement, despite the fact that the essay called for the real abolition of this binary. Michael O'Pray has usefully shown the way that categories helpful in British cinema in the 1970s, even when more fine-grained than Wollen's, lost much of their utility in the 1980s with new funding policies and increased traffic between a broad front of filmmaking both outside and on the edge of the mainstream.<sup>191</sup> Studies like O'Pray's should promote the cautious application of Wollen's blueprint. Yet it is not obligatory to approach the essay only as a superseded historical artefact. For Wollen's problematic attempt to chart the fraught, but potentially productive, interactions between different avant-gardes seems prescient now as the relationships between film, the moving image, galleries, museums, cinemas, art criticism, art history, film studies and so on, become increasingly complex and, at times, vexed. Yet these matters should be approached not by assuming a binary but via detailed analyses of the convergences, interconnections, divides, dispersals and porous boundaries of this cinematic ecology.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Michael O'Pray, 'The British Avant-Garde and Art Cinema from the 1970s to the 1990s', in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 179-181

<sup>192</sup> As described in Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), pp. 21-23, and Erika Balsom, 'Brakhage's Sour Grapes, or Notes on Experimental Cinema in the Art World', *Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ)* 1:1 (January, 2012), pp. 13-25. Chiara Marchini, meanwhile, has helpfully used the two avant-gardes framework to show the separation and simultaneous rapprochement of distinct traditions at Documenta 6 in Germany in 1977 as a contribution to the genealogy of contemporary artist's moving image. Chiara

Reading these texts by Mulvey and Wollen together allows one to follow the cross-connections between and within their works. The influences of Russian Formalism and French apparatus theory that I highlighted in ‘Godard and Counter Cinema’ in chapter two can be discerned in ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, as can the cinephile canon first seen in Wollen’s early *New Left Review* writings discussed in my first chapter. The famous triad of cinematic looks in Mulvey’s essay is, I have suggested, modelled on the enumeration of looks given in Wollen’s 1972 inaugural lecture at Northwestern University, which transposed to film some of the investigations of tense, person and enunciation of structural linguistics. At the same time, juxtaposing Wollen’s ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’ with Mulvey’s writings of the same time throws into relief the fact that it is feminist filmmaking that forms the unacknowledged prototype for the ‘third avant-garde’. Placing ‘Visual Pleasure’ next to Mulvey’s theorisation of melodrama accentuates the way the accounts of spectatorship in these two areas invert one another, as well as the close tie that always exists in Mulvey and Wollen’s work between the critique of dominant cinematic forms and the production of counter-cinema. Indeed, I use the tension between the polemic against identification in ‘Visual Pleasure’ and its valorisation in Mulvey’s writing on melodrama to try to unfold the notion of ‘passionate detachment’, the dialectic of distanced critique and affective investment that I argue is a defining dynamic across Mulvey and Wollen’s work – as, in fact, in the mixing of historical narrative and semiotic analysis with strategic intervention in the milieu of 1970s British independent film culture that structures ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’.

These texts also get their meaning from their relationship to Mulvey and Wollen’s films, particularly *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), which puts questions of

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Marchini, ‘The Two Avant-Gardes at documenta 6’, paper given at Writing Histories of the Moving Image Symposium, Central St Martins, University of the Arts London, 26 March 2015

identification, melodrama and the combination avant-gardes into play together, along with numerous other issues. It is to this film that I turn at the beginning of chapter four. In chapter four I also deepen the account of chapter 3 by returning to similar theoretical terrain through slightly later texts. I examine Mulvey's explicit and sustained theorisation of the relationship between feminism and cinematic experiment in her essay 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde', in doing so gesturing back (sometimes implicitly) to all the writings discussed in chapter three. I look also to the theoretical grounding Wollen gives to his more programmatic 'The Two Avant-Gardes', by interrogating at length some of his writings of the late 1970s.

## 4. Film in the House of the Word<sup>1</sup>

### *Riddles of the Sphinx*

*Riddles of the Sphinx*, made in 1976 and released in 1977, is a paradigmatic example of 1970s British independent film.<sup>2</sup> Its background was the Independent Film-Makers' Association, which, having been founded in 1974, had its first conference in 1976 and its first Annual General Meeting in 1977, at the latter of which Wollen chaired a panel.<sup>3</sup> It was funded by the BFI Production Board, a state institution that also financed IFA-allied filmmakers like Gidal (*Condition of Illusion*, 1975), the Berwick Street Collective ('36-77, 1978), Jonathan Curling and Sue Clayton (*Song of the Shirt*, 1979) and Le Grice (*Finnegans Chin – Temporal Economy*, 1981).<sup>4</sup> (Head of the Production Board from 1975 to 1985 was Peter Sainsbury, co-founder and former editor of *Afterimage*.) Although *Riddles of the Sphinx* could not be said to have been made by a collective like Cinema Action, the London Women's Film Group or the Berwick Street Collective – Mulvey and Wollen primarily made creative decisions while technical tasks were carried out by the crew, a separation of mental and manual labour (going back to Wollen's partition of composition and performance in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*) indicative of the way Mulvey and Wollen made films as intellectuals rather than artisans – everyone working on the

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<sup>1</sup> My title cites Hollis Frampton, 'Film in the House of the Word', *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. Bruce Jenkins (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 166-170

<sup>2</sup> *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977. Colour, 16mm, 91 minutes. Produced by the BFI Production Board, £19,300

<sup>3</sup> Colin Perry, 'Into the Mainstream: Independent Film and Video Counterpublics and Television in Britain, 1974-1990', PhD thesis, University of the Arts London, 2016, p. 151

<sup>4</sup> Christophe Dupin, 'The British Film Institute as a sponsor and producer of non-commercial film: a contextualised analysis of the origins, policy, administration, policy and achievements of the BFI Experimental Film Fund (1952-1965) and Production Board', PhD thesis, Birkbeck, University of London, 2005, pp. 309-311

film received the same wage.<sup>5</sup> Childcare – a central topic in the film – is listed in the credits alongside cast and crew. Socialist and feminist principles were therefore put to work in the film’s production. The film was screened much more widely than *Penthesilea*, indicative of the growing number of spaces willing to exhibit counter-cinematic works.<sup>6</sup> (As well as the Edinburgh Film Festival, there was the short-lived London radical cinema the Other Cinema, whose board of management Mulvey was on.) *Riddles of the Sphinx* also received significant attention in the alternative and ‘theoretical’ press.<sup>7</sup> One can see, then, that in the period between *Penthesilea* and *Riddles of the Sphinx* ‘an autonomous space of oppositional cinema’ had opened up in Britain, as Jonathan Curling and Fran McLean termed it in their report on the IFA’s first AGM.<sup>8</sup>

This context seems to have changed Mulvey and Wollen’s conceptualisation of counter-cinema, as a jointly written text in *Afterimage* in 1976 indicates. Where ‘Godard and Counter Cinema’ described a battle by revolutionary aesthetic forms against reactionary ones, here they conceive of it as an oppositional institutional formation including ‘production, distribution, exhibition, critical writing,

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<sup>5</sup> A 1977 letter to *Screen* from Wollen, moreover, indicates support for collective film production. See Peter Wollen, ‘Correspondence’, *Screen* 18:1 (Spring, 1977) p. 119

<sup>6</sup> The film opened at the Other Cinema in London and played at the Berlinale and Edinburgh Film Festival in 1977, and in Paris, New York and at a conference on ‘The Cinematic Apparatus’ at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1978. See Other Cinema listing: *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Laura Mulvey artist file, British Artists’ Film and Video Study Collection, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London; *31<sup>st</sup> Edinburgh International Film Festival* (1977 programme), p. 85; Volker Pantenburg, ‘The Third Avant-Garde: Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen, and the Theory-Film’, paper given at the Whitechapel Gallery, 14 May 2016, p. 8; John Dawson and Sean Tait, ‘Interview: Wollen’, *On Film* 7 (Winter, 1977), p. 35; Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath, ‘Preface’, in Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (eds.), *The Cinematic Apparatus* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980), p. ix

<sup>7</sup> The film made the cover of *Time Out* 371 (6-12 May, 1977). Numerous interviews with Mulvey and Wollen were published, cited below. For the script, see Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, ‘Riddles of the Sphinx’, *Screen* 18:2 (Summer, 1977), pp. 61-77. My quotations of the film’s dialogue are drawn from here

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Curling and Fran McLean, ‘The Independent Film-Makers’ Association – Annual General Meeting and Conference’, *Screen* 18:1 (Spring, 1977), p. 109

discussion’.<sup>9</sup> In this project of building and sustaining a counter-cinema, the textual strategies and content of a film are ‘part of a broader struggle’,<sup>10</sup> in which ‘the film should be incomplete [...] an intervention in an ongoing collective activity’.<sup>11</sup>

*Penthesilea* appears to have been a hinge point for this – while constructed around the formal counter-cinematic strategies mapped by Wollen in 1972, in exhibiting the film Mulvey discovered herself working to create a climate for its reception: ‘[i]n discussion after screenings, I find I am doing agitational work for building a counter-cinema’.<sup>12</sup> This new understanding chimes closely with ideas circulating in the IFA; in Curling and McLean’s view, the IFA was ‘not just as a group of film practitioners, but [...] a group of activists working with and within cinema’, and had as its objective ‘a cinema of “social practice”’.<sup>13</sup> The structure of *Riddles of the Sphinx* reflects this, as its fissured, modular form encourages its connection with and integration into social practices, recalling Brecht’s contrast of how Aristotelian theatre forms ‘an indivisible whole’, in which ‘nothing must be taken “out of its context”, say, to set it into the context of reality’, to his own plays in which ‘the single whole is made up of independent parts which can and must be compared with the corresponding part-incidents in real life’.<sup>14</sup>

The reader-as-producer from Wollen’s writing of the early 1970s is also socialised. Although *Riddles of the Sphinx* aims to leave space for the viewer’s activity through its open cinematic form, Wollen was increasingly dissatisfied with the poststructuralist thought that had informed his earlier writing, which he now

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<sup>9</sup> Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, ‘Written Discussion’, *Afterimage* 6 (Summer, 1976), p. 33

<sup>10</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Written Discussion’, p. 31

<sup>11</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Written Discussion’, p. 33

<sup>12</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Written Discussion’, p. 33

<sup>13</sup> Curling and McLean, ‘The Independent Film-Makers’ Association’, pp. 108 and 109

<sup>14</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Journals 1935-1955*, ed. John Willett, trans. Hugh Rorrison (London: Methuen, 1993), p. 83

viewed as idealist and having a primarily rhetorical relationship to Marxism.<sup>15</sup> Hence, Mulvey and Wollen sought to reconfigure the social relations of reception, notably in a series of screenings at the Other Cinema in late 1977 revolving around discussions with feminist theorists, at which Mulvey was present but barred from speaking.<sup>16</sup> The rationale behind this was described by Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen in relation to *Nightcleaners* (Berwick Street Collective, 1975), in a passage that gestures back to Wollen's 1972 Conclusion to *Signs and Meaning* while also extending the argument beyond textuality: '[n]ew social relations of consumption for political cinema would involve creating a situation in which the viewer is not only able to participate, but is required to do so. The act of filming and the act of viewing comprise two moments of equal value [...] the viewer must work on the film text – to achieve the process of meaning production which is the film'.<sup>17</sup>

In keeping with its positioning in a radical cinema under assembly, *Riddles of the Sphinx* is a constructive work, as opposed to the destructive work *Penthesilea*, which was largely defined by negation. It seeks a non-oppressive cinematic pleasure, unlike *Penthesilea*'s rigorous unpleasure; where the earlier film dramatised the near-silence of women under patriarchy, in *Riddles of the Sphinx* numerous female voices speak political, theoretical and personal discourses.<sup>18</sup> *Riddles of the Sphinx* is a

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<sup>15</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Written Discussion', p. 37

<sup>16</sup> These screenings are mentioned in Stephen Heath, 'Difference', *Screen* 19:3 (Autumn, 1978), p. 111; Lester D. Friedman, 'An Interview with Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey on Riddles of the Sphinx', *Millennium Film Journal* 4/5 (Summer, 1979), p. 32; Laura Mulvey, 'Women & Representation: A Discussion with Laura Mulvey' (interview with Jane Clarke, Sue Clayton, Joanna Cleland, Rosie Elliott and Mandy Merck), *Wedge* 2 (Spring, 1978), p. 53. I have been unable to ascertain who gave presentations

<sup>17</sup> Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, 'Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film', *Screen* 16:4 (1975-6), p. 113. Curling and McLean note how reconfiguring the reception context of films as a political practice, and the steps towards this taken by groups such as Cinema Action and London Women's Film Group, was also discussed at the 1976 IFA AGM conference. See Curling and McLean, 'The Independent Film-Makers' Association', p. 115

<sup>18</sup> On this last point see Friedman, 'An Interview with Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey', p. 23; and Mulvey, 'Women & Representation', p. 47



bridge between the two avant-gardes. Beyond merely incorporating devices and strategies associated with each, it attempts to hold signifier and signified in tension, not allowing one to overrun the other, as in the Cubist moment preceding the splitting of the avant-gardes in Wollen's account. Form and content are in a montage relation, planned separately as distinct axes that at times cross, at times diverge: 'we gave a lot of attention both to formal things and to content [...] we would think them out separately and then see how they would mesh'.<sup>19</sup> Mulvey claims that the length of shots was decided before what would be in them, counteracting the tendency to subordinate formal decisions to content.<sup>20</sup>

Just as relevant for the film are debates within 1970s feminism. *Riddles of the Sphinx* examines childcare – gesturing to a concern of the women's movement going back to the demand for 24-hour nurseries made at the first women's liberation conference in the UK, at Ruskin College in 1970 – and housework – engaging with the 'domestic labour debate' of the period as the sphinx's voiceover ponders '[i]s domestic labour productive?'<sup>21</sup> Most extensively, the film explores motherhood and its devaluation, evincing arguments cognate with, for instance, Adrienne Rich's 1976 *Of Woman Born*.<sup>22</sup> In an interview in 1978, Mulvey states that 'we've all got mothers and have relationships with mothers, which has never been seen as a subject for either poetry or any kind of representation – apart from one kind of iconographic unity in Christian mythology on the one hand, or a fetishistic working on a kind of

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<sup>19</sup> Friedman, 'An Interview with Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey', p. 14. See similar remarks in Dawson and Tait, 'Interview: Wollen', p. 30; and Peter Wollen, 'Knight's Moves', *Public* 25 (Spring 2002), pp. 59-60

<sup>20</sup> Friedman, 'An Interview with Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey', p. 26

<sup>21</sup> For the demand for 24-hour nurseries, see 'The Four Demands', in Micheline Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London: Virago, 1990), pp. 242-243, reprinted from *Women's Newspaper* 1 (6 March, 1971). For an account of the 'domestic labour debate' (often referred to metonymically via the Wages for Housework campaign), see Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), pp. 13-29

<sup>22</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976)

castration basis from the son's point of view'.<sup>23</sup> A number of feminist artworks of this period employ the same subject matter; centrally, of course, Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979), to which I return, but also Susan Hiller's photograph and text piece about pregnancy, *Ten Months* (1979), and the LA-based collective Mother Art's *Laundry Works* (1977), performance works taking place in laundromats.<sup>24</sup> In filmmaking, this tendency is exemplified by *Mirror Phase* (Carola Klein, 1978) – Klein co-edited *Riddles of the Sphinx* – and *Daughter Rite* (Michelle Citron, 1979).

Like some of these works, but unlike Adrienne Rich, *Riddles of the Sphinx* frames maternity psychoanalytically, with reference to desire, the Symbolic order and the Oedipus complex. The sphinx and its riddle is a favoured image in psychoanalysis. Most notably, the Sphinx appears in the Oedipus myth that Freud appropriated for his complex of the same name, the familial drama recast in the middle section of *Riddles of the Sphinx*. Elsewhere, Freud uses 'The Riddle of the Sphinx' as a sub-heading in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.<sup>25</sup> Freud speaks of femininity as a riddle in his lecture 'Femininity' (whose mythical origin story for weaving is referred to in the British Museum sequence of the film), in which he declares that the task of psychoanalysis is to 'enquir[e]' into how a woman 'comes

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<sup>23</sup> Mulvey, 'Women & Representation', p. 47. See also Sandy Flitterman and Jacqueline Suter, 'Textual Riddles: Woman as Enigma or Site of Social Meanings? An Interview with Laura Mulvey', *Discourse* 1 (Fall, 1979), pp. 93, 108 and 109. For an extrapolation of *Riddles of the Sphinx*'s politics of motherhood, see E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York and London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 172-173

<sup>24</sup> Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 2-12

<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. VII (1901-1905)*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953), p. 194

into being'.<sup>26</sup> Lacan continues the deployment of the Sphinx image.<sup>27</sup> The film seeks to decipher such riddles of myth and the unconscious via critique, contemplation and exploration from a feminist perspective. The place of the Sphinx in the Oedipus story, outside the city of Thebes, is read as homologous with the 'suppressed' place of the mother in patriarchy, both 'cast outside the gates of culture', as Griselda Pollock writes.<sup>28</sup> Psychoanalysis is both critically interrogated and appropriated by the film, in a manner familiar from Mulvey's writing and from *Penthesilea*.

The film's first section, 'Opening pages', sets up the notion of film-as-text. An image of a hand flicking pages restates the metaphor of reading a film from *Penthesilea*.<sup>29</sup> This is overlaid with a quotation from Gertrude Stein (fig. 15), drawn from *How to Write*,<sup>30</sup> which is followed by a cinematic 'table of contents' numbering and naming the film's sections (fig. 16). In the second section, 'Laura speaking', Mulvey appears in front of a black background reminiscent of *Le Gai savoir*. She sits at a table covered in artefacts (fig. 17), encouraging a kind of iconographic analysis. A toy globe gestures to the globes that are a frequent presence in European oil painting, for instance in Hans Holbein the Younger's *The*

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<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity', in 'New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XXII (1932-1936)*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1964), pp. 132, 116

<sup>27</sup> For instance, Jacques Lacan, 'Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis', *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 8

<sup>28</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'Still Working on the Subject: Feminist Poetics and its Avant-Garde Moment', in Sabine Breitwieser (ed.), *Rereading Post-Partum Document: Mary Kelly* (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 1999), p. 238

<sup>29</sup> John Dawson, 'A Current of Modernism', *On Film 7*, p. 52; Winfried Pauleit, "'Riddles of the Sphinx": The Work of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Between Counter-Strategy and Deconstruction', online at

[http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/art\\_and\\_cinematography/mulvey\\_mollen/](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/art_and_cinematography/mulvey_mollen/) (last accessed December 13, 2017). Reprinted in booklet of Arsenal DVD of *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *AMY!*, unpaginated

<sup>30</sup> Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (West Glover: Something Else Press, 1973), p. 260

*Ambassadors* (1533). There are technologies of recording and playback (a microphone and a tape player/recorder), of reading and writing (a felt tip pen, a highlighter, a notebook and a book) and of looking (glasses), evoking the scientific instruments and books of *The Ambassadors*. ‘Laura speaking’ immediately recalls Wollen’s lecture in *Penthesilea*, as Mulvey addresses the camera with a monologue on the Sphinx myth as symptom of patriarchy, as well as directing attention to the film itself, in which the voice of the Sphinx will play the role of ‘imaginary narrator’. Although these moments in the two films suggest the parallel of the presence of Farocki or Godard in their works, there is a significant difference. Farocki and Godard often appear alongside the technical equipment of filmmaking – the camera (Godard in *Loin du Vietnam*), a video monitor and playback devices (Godard in *Numero Deux*), or the editing station (Farocki in his 1995 installation *Interface*), indicating a mode of cinematic thinking that works via film’s technological apparatus. Mulvey and Wollen, however, appear as intellectuals, communicating ideas through speech.

In the third section, ‘Stones’, found footage advertising Egyptian tours and 8mm footage is refilmed on a motion analyser projector. The images here evoke exoticism, mystery, fascination, accentuated by shots of postcards, tourists and vendors, figuring the Sphinx as the object of an othering gaze. Subjecting this footage to ‘zooms, step motion, slow and reverse motion, freeze frames, and extreme close-up (concentrating on the Sphinx’s mouth) eventually showing film grain’,<sup>31</sup> the section functions both as analysis, interrogating the Sphinx image, and as a kind of threshold, carrying the viewer into the material of celluloid, on the other

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<sup>31</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Riddles of the Sphinx’, p. 63

side of which, in the fourth section, they will emerge into a fictional space.<sup>32</sup> The focus on the mouth presages how the Sphinx, in the following section, will speak. The sequence brings to mind *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (Ken Jacobs, 1969), identified by Mulvey and Wollen as an inspiration, a defining work of structural film in which Jacobs refilmed a 1905 Biograph short, zooming and manipulating the frame rate to revel in grain and flicker.<sup>33</sup> Yet there is a crucial distance between *Riddles of the Sphinx* and structural film. For while much structural film is typified by asceticism, the introduction in this sequence of Mike Ratledge's music inaugurates a sensory pleasure to match the intellectual one the film has heretofore offered, just as alternative visual pleasure – untainted by the sadism and voyeurism described in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' – will be offered by the rich colours in sections four and five of the film, or the satisfaction of watching acrobats, skilful bodies engaged in disciplined play.

Section four, 'Louise's story told in thirteen shots' begins with the first of thirteen intertitles preceding each shot. Fragmentary texts, all except the first and last begin and end in the middle of a sentence (figs. 19-21). They provide a thread of narrative but cannot be joined together to make a seamless passage. They speak impersonally, in the third person, establishing distance from events. In the first three shots, Ratledge's music is on the audio-track along with the disembodied 'voice off' of the Sphinx. The Sphinx's speech (read by Mary Maddox), with its miniature sentences, its Steinian repetitions and variations, is poetic, tentative, exploratory. The occasional first person indicates a position internal to onscreen events. Where the intertitles exemplify the syntagmatic plane, a horizontal progression, the

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<sup>32</sup> Friedman, 'An Interview with Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey', p. 18; Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'Riddles of the Avant-Garde' (interview with Don Ranvaud), *Framework 9* (Winter 1978-79), p. 31

<sup>33</sup> See Mulvey's remarks in the BFI *Riddles of the Sphinx* DVD/blu-ray commentary

Sphinx's voice here proceeds via the phonetic and semantic relations of the associative (or paradigmatic) plane:

Nesting. From the nest. Blood. Brood.  
From the breast. Caressed.  
Hurting.

Bleeding. It was obvious.  
It was as obvious as it was oblivious.

Mind the child. I never minded the warmth. I minded the need. It was needed to have minded, I used to say, but was it needed to have minded very much?  
(From pan 2)

At this point, the Sphinx voices the contradictory emotions of motherhood, but they are still, for the most part, only felt, not yet understood politically.

All the shots in Louise's story are 360-degree pans, rigorous camera movements providing discontinuous cross-sections of a life. Volker Pantenburg has furnished a number of illuminating reflections on these pans – they circumvent 'the established dichotomy of montage vs. the non-edited long-take', by creating the relations between objects or images associated with editing within a single shot; they 'register the totality of a given space'; they are a movement without spatial progress, since the camera returns to its starting point; they are impersonal and yet carefully composed.<sup>34</sup> One might add their evasion, like *Penthesilea*, of the creative act implied by a cut, since the latter necessarily comes when the camera has completed its circle;<sup>35</sup> and their – by following the trajectory of a piece of equipment rather than of character action – neutrality and automatism. Congruent with 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', the latter establishes a certain distance to counteract the emotionality and closeness of character and plot, reduces the extent to

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<sup>34</sup> Pantenburg, 'The Third Avant-Garde', pp. 7-8

<sup>35</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Riddles of the Avant-Garde', p. 30

which the spectator engages with the fictional world in terms of the Imaginary and identification, and de-voyeurises the look towards the female characters inhabiting the diegesis. As Mary Ann Doane describes, each pan ‘effects a continual displacement of the gaze which “catches” the woman’s body only accidentally, momentarily, refusing to fix her in the frame. The camera consistently transforms its own framing to elide the possibility of a fetishism of the female body’.<sup>36</sup>

Pantenburg isolates antecedents of such a procedure in Michael Snow’s ‘trilogy on camera movement’ (1967’s *Wavelength*, 1969’s *Back and Forth*, 1971’s *La Région centrale*), Akerman’s *La chambre* and to a lesser extent Godard’s *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (*Deux ou Trois choses que je sais d’elle*, 1967) and Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Partner* (1968),<sup>37</sup> a list we might augment with Huillet and Straub’s *Fortini/Cani* (1976), Raynal’s *Deux fois*, works by the British structural landscape filmmaker Chris Welsby, such as *Seven Days* (1974) and *Stream Line* (1976), whom Mulvey and Wollen both wrote about;<sup>38</sup> as well as, beyond the avant-garde frame, the penultimate shot of Antonioni’s *The Passenger* (1975), which Wollen co-wrote. As these indicate, the pan has a privileged connection with the ‘landscape film’, in which what is normally background becomes the primary material under investigation.<sup>39</sup> *Riddles of the Sphinx* makes use of this property of panning. However, it focuses the viewer’s attention not on landscape as traditionally conceived but generally on interior *mise en scène* (in this respect, it is closer to *La chambre* than any of the other works, as Pantenburg observes).<sup>40</sup> The reason for this

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<sup>36</sup> Mary Ann Doane, ‘Woman’s Stake: Filming the Female Body’, *October* 17 (Summer, 1981), p. 34

<sup>37</sup> Pantenburg, ‘The Third Avant-Garde’

<sup>38</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Introduction’, in David Curtis, (ed.), *Chris Welsby: Films/Photographs/Writings* ([London]: Arts Council of Great Britain, [1980]), pp. 2-3; Laura Mulvey, liner notes for BFI *Chris Welsby* DVD

<sup>39</sup> Volker Pantenburg, ‘Panoramique: Panning over Landscapes’, in Christophe Girot and Fred Truniger (eds.), *Landscape, Vision, Motion* (Berlin: jovis, 2012), pp. 121-137

<sup>40</sup> Pantenburg, ‘The Third Avant-Garde’, pp. 9-10

is found in Mulvey's writing on Hollywood melodrama, in which she accorded *mise en scène* a central role – what was repressed, unspoken, was projected onto props, setting, lighting, movement of bodies in space, camera height, framing. The carefully coded *mise en scène* of *Riddles of the Sphinx*, with its Sirk-influenced visual motifs of flowers, reflections, and its expressive use of colour (see figs. 22-31), provides 'a central point of orientation for the spectator' ('NSM', 43): while the voice of Louise (Dinah Stabb), the central character, is suppressed during the first three pans, here and throughout the film the viewer deciphers the semiotic territory revealed by panning, for instance the warm primary colours in the spaces crowded with household objects in the kitchen and bedroom, in contrast to the denuded life-world of the hall, the workplace and the canteen, with their cold whites and dull browns, dead flowers and sparse furnishings. *Riddles of the Sphinx* is a structural landscape film set in Sirkian *mise en scène*.

Louise's story parallels classical Hollywood melodramas like *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), telling the story of a woman who separates from her husband, begins to raise her child as a single mother, enters the world of paid work; a move from private to public sphere alongside the continuing drama of the mother-child relationship, though the trade union politics Louise will eventually participate in is far from the petty-bourgeois entrepreneurship of *Mildred Pierce*'s title character. Yet unlike most melodrama, *Riddles of the Sphinx* does not seek to induce a pathetic response in the viewer, as this is counteracted by the distancing strategies already mentioned, making for a Brechtian melodrama, as it were. Louise's story carries the typicality we might associate with Brecht, and we might even project the melodramatic emphasis on gesture onto Brecht's *Gestus*, an individual gesture



pregnant with a social meaning.<sup>41</sup> The tension between intimacy and distance relates the film to Yvonne Rainer's *Lives of Performers*, which explicitly billed itself as a melodrama and evinces a number of the same strategies as *Riddles of the Sphinx*. Annette Michelson's meditations on Rainer's film are apposite here. Michelson ponders how 'to compose a narrative work without succumbing to the temptations of fictional illusionism and mythical reference? [...] First, by falling back, as it were, to the terrain of the private, personal experience'. Second, by looking to the 'forms and rhetoric of those psychological situations which compose the repertory of domestic drama'. Thus, *Lives of Performers* suggests 'the uses of such material, how they can be distanced, the extraction of the formal potential from these constraints and ambiguities'.<sup>42</sup> In its juxtaposition of the materials and preoccupations of melodrama with avant-garde procedures, *Riddles of the Sphinx* fuses the structuring absences discernible in 'Visual Pleasure'.

The film takes melodrama and makes of it a psychoanalytic fable, a 'literal analytic biography' charting Anna's (Rhiannon Tise) journey out of childhood and the related trajectories of those close to her.<sup>43</sup> Unlike the accounts we find in Freud or Maud Mannoni (the latter of whom Mulvey also read), the psychic drama is told from the mother's point of view.<sup>44</sup> Evidently, central here is the Oedipus Complex, the importance of which to Mulvey's work is already clear, and to which Wollen dedicated a short essay in *7 Days*, apparently influenced by Mulvey and Juliet Mitchell, arguing that '[s]ome feminists [...] have tried to stand Freud on his head

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<sup>41</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (Methuen, 1964), p. 36n1 and the note by Willett on p. 42

<sup>42</sup> Annette Michelson, 'Yvonne Rainer, Part Two: "Lives of Performers"', *Artforum* 12:6 (February, 1974), pp. 31 and 32

<sup>43</sup> The phrase comes from 'Afterword 2' in Mulvey, 'Women & Representation', p. 52. Which of the five interviewers wrote this afterword is not stated

<sup>44</sup> Maud Mannoni, *The Child, His "Illness", and the Others* (New York: Random House, 1970); interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 4 August 2014

and extract the feminist kernel. Freud provided a damning indictment of the patriarchal family, without realizing the implications of his own work'.<sup>45</sup> The Freudian account is overlain, though, by Lacanian and Kristevan formulations. In its Lacanian iteration the resolution of the Oedipus complex becomes, of course, the entry into the Symbolic order, and this difficult entry is one of *Riddles of the Sphinx*'s central themes,<sup>46</sup> manifested in the very first intertitle (fig. 19). As Merck and Tony Safford have both observed, Louise's dilemma is the one described near the beginning of 'Visual Pleasure': '[e]ither she must gracefully give way to the word, the name of the father and the law, or else struggle to keep her child down with her in the half-light of the imaginary' ('VPNC', 15).<sup>47</sup>

This pre-Oedipal, pre-Symbolic moment of the mother-child dyad is theorised by Kristeva as the *chora*. As Kaja Silverman explains, for Kristeva the *chora* is associated 'both with the mother and the prehistory of the subject [...] the infant invokes the mother as a source of warmth, nourishment, and bodily care by means of various vocal and muscular spasms, and the mother's answering sounds and gestures weave a provisional enclosure around the child'. In it, mother and child are unified rather than differentiated.<sup>48</sup> The *chora* is figured in the first three pans. In the first and third, Louise holds Anna close, at the hip; the framing in kitchen and bedroom shows a view of Louise's body from Anna's height. Louise, Anna and the home complement each another: Louise's clothes in the first pan match the kitchen

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Oedipus Complex', *7 Days* 3 (10 November, 1971), p. 17

<sup>46</sup> Flitterman and Suter, 'Textual Riddles', p. 115; see also Mulvey, 'Women & Representation', p. 49

<sup>47</sup> Mandy Merck, 'Mulvey's Manifesto', *Camera Obscura* 66 (September, 2007), p. 8; and Tony Safford, 'Riddles of the Political Unconscious', *On Film* 7 (Winter, 1977), p. 42. The 1976 ICA Patriarchy conference brought Lacanian concepts into wider discussion in the British women's movement. See *Papers on Patriarchy* (Brighton: Women's Publishing Collective, 1976)

<sup>48</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 102; see Julia Kristeva, 'Place Names', *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 282-286

colour scheme; Anna's dress in the kitchen is made of the same fabric as the bedroom curtains. In the kitchen in particular, a safe, comforting, even womblike roundness is emphasised by the doubling of the circularity of the pan in the markings on the crockery and the shapes of the fruit and eggs.<sup>49</sup> This *chora* will be interrupted by Chris – when he enters the first pan at the end, bringing with him a different colour scheme and bearing a newspaper, signifying language, law, money and property (in a headline about mortgages) and the public sphere; his speech at the end of the third pan breaks the 'sonorous envelope' that has up to that point been created by the circling, repetitive music and Sphinx's voice.<sup>50</sup>

The end of this third pan, with Chris's departure and the first direct sound, relocates the film; in the fourth, the *chora* is broken when Louise leaves Anna in a nursery. Pans 4-6 take place indoors, but outside the confines of the home, with more distant framing and the absence of music and the Sphinx's voice, replaced by multiple overlapping diegetic voices captured by sync sound. In the fifth, Louise is seen – without Anna for the first time – engaging in paid work, the feminised labour of the switchboard (one with a long filmic lineage, from *The Lonedale Operator* (Griffith, 1911) to *Love Affair, or the Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* (Makavejev, 1967)). The telephone connects distant places, an association reinforced by the appearance of a world map. The increasingly insistent presence of the Symbolic order is felt in these shots, but the Symbolic is not associated with men, who barely feature in the film (Chris, the only male character to speak, will return just once). The sixth pan is in the workplace cafeteria. Louise is seen taking a break, but the work of social reproduction – food preparation, clearing up –

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<sup>49</sup> Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 85

<sup>50</sup> Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, pp. 129-131

continues for other women, evoking the same labour done unpaid by Louise in the first pan, in which she seated Anna, whisked, cooked and served eggs, all at different stations around the kitchen, the labour and the motion of the camera suggesting a production line. Political activism first surfaces here, in the switchboard operators' discussions of childcare, linking their personal experiences of motherhood with the demand for a workplace nursery.

This debate continues in the seventh pan, whose soundtrack records a conversation in which the voice of a trade unionist (played by Rosalind Delmar) dominates, discussing the difficult interface of the women's movement and traditional socialist politics that the demand for childcare brings to light. This seventh shot is a pivot, the centre of the film.<sup>51</sup> This centrality is marked visually: with Louise and other characters in a van at a roundabout on their way to a union meeting, the camera traces an orbit, circling the roundabout on another vehicle and turning on its axis – stretching, warping, distending space. The shot also represents, we might argue, how this is the high point of collective politics in the narrative, from which the film will now turn away. The co-articulation of feminism and socialism, opened up by the film's attention to social reproduction, gets stuck (as in the Jessie Ashley section of *Penthesilea*), as Louise doesn't pursue this activism in the rest of the film.

In the next three shots, marking the beginning of the second half of Louise's story, Louise and Anna are back together, but instead of the intimate environment of the home signifying the *chora*, we have spaces that are open or outside or both, the distances in the shots connoting the less close relation between mother and daughter. There is a sense here of an alternative family centred around women, through the

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<sup>51</sup> Mulvey, BFI *Riddles of the Sphinx* DVD/blu-ray commentary

presence of Maxine (Merdelle Jordine) and Louise's mother (played by Wollen's mother). A documentary element surfaces too, providing an archival image of a British shopping centre in 1976, for instance. It is almost entirely populated by women and children. Over a shot in a playground, the Sphinx returns, speaking somewhat associatively but in full sentences now, introducing the linguistic third person – suggesting a more analytical perspective – and a collective subject, women:

Can a child-care campaign attack anything fundamental to women's oppression? Should women's struggle be concentrated on economic issues? [...] Does the oppression of women work on the unconscious as well as on the conscious? What would the politics of the unconscious be like? How necessary is being-a-mother to women, in reality or imagination?

The different issues the film has raised confront one another. Personal and political intertwine – on the audio-track, where the Sphinx speaks of how the questions 'led both out into society and back into her own memory', and in the *Gestus* of Louise reading *Spare Rib* while supervising Anna on the climbing frame.

The last three pans of 'Louise's story' are interior shots marked by a high level of visual, temporal and conceptual complexity. The right-to-left motion of earlier pans is reversed. Pantenburg points out that because in Western culture writing goes from left to right, a pan in that direction implies progression; by contrast, their inversion here suggests a kind of involution, as the film's attention becomes, once more, primarily psychological.<sup>52</sup> In the eleventh pan, Louise and Maxine sit with Chris in his editing room as he shows them footage he has been working on. The moving images here produce other spaces within the 'real' space of the editing room, a disorientation intensified by the way the pan opens and closes on

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<sup>52</sup> Pantenburg, 'The Third Avant-Garde'. I draw here also on Pantenburg's comments in the Q&A sessions later in the day at Whitechapel Gallery

pure white screen and is punctuated, between the films and video, with pure blackness. At these points, it is hard to tell that the camera is moving, fissuring the experience of smooth movement previously felt with the pans.

Mary Kelly is revealed in this footage, recalling a similar shot of Helke Sander in VALIE EXPORT's *Invisible Adversaries* (*Unsichtbare Gegner*, 1976). Kelly's appearance here is one of many interchanges between her and Mulvey and Wollen. Kelly reviewed *Penthesilea* in *Spare Rib* in 1974; Mulvey reviewed *Post-Partum Document* in the same publication in 1976, revisiting Kelly's artworks in essays of 1986 and 2010;<sup>53</sup> Kelly and Mulvey discussed *Post-Partum Document* in public at the ICA in 1983;<sup>54</sup> Wollen would write about Kelly for a 1997 exhibition in a text whose content and structure relate to *Riddles of the Sphinx*.<sup>55</sup> *Post-Partum Document* is concerned with the same material as *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 'the contradictory emotions that necessarily come with motherhood, which have been almost taboo as a subject for art in male dominated culture', as Mulvey writes in her *Post-Partum Document* review.<sup>56</sup> *Riddles of the Sphinx*'s knotting of feminism-psychoanalysis-motherhood-formalism is matched by the feminism-psychoanalysis-motherhood-conceptualism of *Post-Partum Document*. In the footage Kelly provides 'some elements of a metalanguage' for understanding the experience of motherhood,

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<sup>53</sup> Laura Mulvey, "'Post Partum Document' by Mary Kelly", *Spare Rib* 53 (December, 1976), p. 40, reprinted in Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-85* (London: Pandora, 1987), p. 203; Laura Mulvey, 'Impending Time: Mary Kelly's *Corpus*', in Mary Kelly, *Interim* (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, Kettle's Yard and Riverside Studios, 1986), reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 154-161; Laura Mulvey, 'Mary Kelly: An Aesthetic of Temporality', in Dominique Heyse-Moore (ed.), *Mary Kelly: Projects 1973-2010* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 88-93

<sup>54</sup> Published as 'Mary Kelly and Laura Mulvey in Conversation' in Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 28-39

<sup>55</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Thirteen Paragraphs', in Judith Mastai (ed.), *Social Process/ Collaborative Action: Mary Kelly 1970-75* (Vancouver: Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, 1997), pp. 25-31

<sup>56</sup> Mulvey, "'Post Partum Document'", p. 203

as Wollen later argues.<sup>57</sup> As we see images of *Post-Partum Document* in a gallery, Kelly reading from her diary and dressing her son, we hear her speak of the “‘splitting of the dyadic mother/child unit’ and ‘the intervention of a “third term” (that is, the father) [...] undermining the Imaginary dyad which determined the intersubjectivity of the pre-Oedipal instance’. Kelly, as artist and mother, enunciates motherhood in its simultaneous ‘theoretical, practical and emotional’ dimensions, as Sandy Flitterman and Jacquelyn Suter argue.<sup>58</sup>

With the twelfth pan we are in a highly textured room filled with folds of curtains, netting, hanging beads, tassels, creepers, much like Wollen’s description of the ‘iconic’ cinema of Sternberg in *Signs and Meaning*. The location is Steve Dwoskin’s attic, and the sequence conjures up lesbian, erotic overtones reminiscent of his films, with its red curtains, dressing gowns, make-up.<sup>59</sup> (Though there has been debate about the nature of the relationship between Louise and Maxine, this *mise en scène* and Anna’s voiceover memory in the following pan of a primal scene of sorts, ‘coming into her mother’s room and finding her friend sleeping next to her mother, and [...] suddenly [understanding] something she realised her mother had tried to explain to her’, make a romantic interpretation more convincing.)<sup>60</sup> The intertitle sets a number of associations up: ‘as in dreams, but takes the form of masquerade, locked into a world of images where each needs to feel sheltered within another’s gaze to find’. Louise reads from Maxine’s dream diary, which manifests the condensation and displacement described in Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The most striking feature of the *mise en scène* are the vastly

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<sup>57</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘The Field of Language in Film’, *October* 17 (Summer, 1981), p. 58

<sup>58</sup> Flitterman and Suter, ‘Textual Riddles’, p. 96

<sup>59</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Stephen Dwoskin’, *Sight and Sound* (September, 2012), p. 74

<sup>60</sup> It is read as romantic in ‘Afterword 2’ in Mulvey, ‘Women & Representation’, p. 53; and in Kaplan, *Women and Film*, pp. 180-181, for instance. Others refer to Maxine as a friend, for instance Pauleit, ‘Between Counter-Strategy and Deconstruction’

overdetermined mirrors scattered everywhere, condensing the multiple resonances of the mirror stage and the Imaginary, (female) narcissism, Sirk, and *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947), the hall of mirrors ending of which symbolises woman as duplicitous and of deceptive appearance. Displacement is visible in the blouse draped over the back of Louise's chair, the same one Mulvey wears in 'Laura speaking' and 'Laura listening' (figs. 17-18), while the mention of a comb several times in the dream diary is followed by the image of a comb in Maxine's hand, a traffic between different fictional orders as objects shift across the film to reappear elsewhere.

Given the above, it is unsurprising that writers such as Rodowick, Stephen Heath and Judith Williamson have taken this scene, with its apparent identification of a highly feminine-coded room with the unconscious, the Imaginary, narcissism and so on, as typifying the way in which despite all the twists and turns in Mulvey and Wollen's use of psychoanalysis, the film reintroduces patriarchal stereotypes.<sup>61</sup> There is a further problematic matter in that these exotic, sensual, erotic and unconscious forces are associated with Maxine (it is her bedroom and these forces have become increasingly present as Louise moves closer to her emotionally through the film), thus projecting them onto blackness and queerness.<sup>62</sup> While in later statements Mulvey notes that she simply wanted to cast her friend Jordine in the film,<sup>63</sup> it is surely strange that two filmmakers so sensitive to the irreducibility of

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<sup>61</sup> D. N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*, second edition (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 244-245; Stephen Heath, 'Difference', p. 73; Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1986), pp. 132-134

<sup>62</sup> Mulvey, 'Women & Representation', p. 50; Kaplan, *Women and Film*, pp. 180-181; Williamson, *Consuming Passions*, p. 134

<sup>63</sup> For instance, on the BFI DVD/blu-ray commentary



signification to intention did not consider the implications of casting a black actress in this role.

The mirrors produce the most stark fragmentation of space in the film, which one might read in the context of the critique of ideology developed in *Screen* over the previous five years. Where ‘the classic realist text ensures the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularity’, allegedly shoring up the viewer in misrecognised wholeness and knowledge,<sup>64</sup> the mirrors draw the viewer into a movement in which grasping the room’s layout and their own positioning is constantly undermined. Initially, for instance, the pan appears to show the room directly, two mirrors within the frame, yet as it pans left it becomes evident that the whole shot has been contained in a much larger mirror (see figs. 32-33). The pan’s most striking image, however, is its revelation near the end of the camera operator, Diane Tammes, along with a glimpse of Mulvey next to her (fig. 34). Wollen states that by 1977 they considered revealing the camera something of a cliché,<sup>65</sup> and indeed the appearance of filmmaker and camera in a mirror can be found from *Ballet Mécanique* (Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, 1924) to *Portrait with Parents* (Guy Sherwin, 1975). However, more than simply a literalisation of artistic reflexivity, the image discloses the *work* done by Tammes, whose camera movements throughout the film have been a kind of invisible labour, just as the film shows Louise’s housework and child care.

The final pan, in the British Museum, is less spatially disorientating than the previous two (though still far from simple, with its rows of glass cabinets producing images within images), but more linguistically and temporally complex. As

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<sup>64</sup> Colin MacCabe, ‘Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses’, *Screen* 15:2 (Summer, 1974), p. 12; Stephen Heath, ‘Lessons from Brecht’, *Screen* 15:2 (Summer, 1974), p. 107

<sup>65</sup> Friedman, ‘An Interview with Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey’, p. 16

Silverman notes, the pronouns here – ‘her’ in the intertitle and the repeated ‘she’ in the voice off – are ambiguous, seeming to refer to the Sphinx, to Anna and an unidentified figure in another story, slipping between them, playing on their status as ‘shifters’ in Jakobson’s terminology.<sup>66</sup> Anna is still a small child in this shot, walking around the museum holding her mother’s hand. Inhabiting Anna’s perspective, the voice off speaks in the past tense but apparently from the future, recalling images that appeared earlier in the film: ‘[s]he remembered how, when she had been very small, her mother had lifted her up to carry her on her hip and how she had hovered around her cot when she fell asleep. She remembered her feeling of triumph when her father left the house’. Through a series of nested memories and quotations, as though opening a set of Russian dolls, we arrive at what Silverman designates ‘the most profoundly interior point of the narrative’, three mysterious words spoken by the Sphinx: ‘Capital. Delay. Body’.<sup>67</sup>

In shifting from the bedroom dream-space to the Egyptian room of the British Museum, the film makes Freud’s connection between the dream-work and hieroglyphs, his claim that ‘the interpretation of dreams is completely analogous to the decipherment of an ancient pictographic script such as Egyptian hieroglyphs’.<sup>68</sup> The hieroglyphs pertain also to Anna’s entry into the Symbolic, indicating the field

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<sup>66</sup> Roman Jakobson, ‘Shifters and Verbal Categories’, *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 388-389. Mulvey mentions Jakobson’s term in the BFI DVD/blu-ray commentary to this section

<sup>67</sup> For Silverman, these signify ‘the three terms around which female subjectivity has traditionally been organized’. ‘Capital’ stands in for economic exchange and women’s position as consumers, commodities and signs; ‘delay’ represents the Oedipus complex, a ‘regime of deferral, displacement, and substitution’; and ‘body’ denotes the historic reduction of female subjectivity to the corporeal. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, pp. 138-140

<sup>68</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Claims of Psycho-Analysis to Scientific Interest’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIII (1913-1914)*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1958), p. 177. The passage is also quoted in Safford, ‘Riddles of the Political Unconscious’, p. 44. Like the sphinx, the hieroglyph is a recurring image in psychoanalytic discourse, frequently mentioned by Lacan also

of signification (they are ‘texts, entombed now in glass’, the intertitle says), and the dominant Eurocentric vision of cultural inheritance from Ancient Egypt (through Greece and Rome) to Western Europe. Although we know Anna is female before this, it is in this context that her becoming a sexed subject is acknowledged, in the phrase ‘ever since she knew she was a little girl’, thus resolving the Oedipus complex.<sup>69</sup> Yet the film departs here from Lacan (and indeed from Kelly, who associated the Symbolic ‘third term’ enabling the break with the Imaginary with the father), positing the possibility of a non-patriarchal Symbolic order, ‘a forgotten history and the power of a different language’ as the intertitle calls it, speaking in an optimistic mode – ‘[s]he felt giddy with success’.

‘She had been drawing acrobats’, the voice off in the British Museum states, ‘trajectories of the body and displays of skill and balance. She saw them no longer as pioneers of the ideal, but as bodies at work, expending their labour power on their own material’. These come to life in the film’s fifth section. The film exits fiction and returns to materiality, in the bodies of the female acrobats and in the work on celluloid, shot in black and white but optically printed in colour. This doubles the refilming in ‘Stones’, however the evocation here is less North American structural film than the London Film-Makers’ Co-op, with its privileging of the moment of printing, in films such as Guy Sherwin’s *At The Academy* (1974). The figures in this sequence are mobile and flexible, unlike the static, petrified Sphinx, a flash of physical work that is utopian, in that it seems to have no end except itself.

In the sixth section, ‘Laura listening’, Mulvey reappears in the setting of ‘Laura speaking’, apparently listening back to her lecture and to portions of the

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<sup>69</sup> As Lorenzo Chiesa explains, for Lacan sexuation is simultaneous with entry into the Symbolic order, which is also the resolution of the Oedipus complex. Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 64-65

voice off from Louise's story. As with *Penthesilea's* video monitors, playback is complicated by the introduction of new material, adding further layers of signification. First, a quotation from the first chapter of *Capital*, where Marx illustrates the fetishism of commodities with the metaphor of the hieroglyph. Second, the Sphinx's voice speaks a new passage, recalling both the dream diary and the poetic voiceover in the early pans. Finally, completing the inversion structure, 'Puzzle ending', alludes to 'Opening pages' in its silent, single shot of hands manipulating an object.<sup>70</sup> Ironically, this image of mercury being manoeuvred into the middle of a maze is a high point of narrative suspense.<sup>71</sup> The implication of non-resolution – after the blobs of mercury reach the centre the puzzle is shaken and the film ends – has been criticised.<sup>72</sup> Yet such a criticism is premised on the demand for a simplified optimistic narrative, effacing the gaps, sidesteps and impasses characteristic of political consciousness. It denies the political need not merely to give answers, but to ask questions.

### **'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde'**

In her last published essay of the 1970s, 1979's 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde', Mulvey attempts a stock-taking of the previous decade of feminist film criticism and production, with the objective of mapping out where to go next.<sup>73</sup> In her account, after roughly a decade since the encounter of cinema and the women's movement, a point has been reached at which an analytical, retrospective gaze is

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<sup>70</sup> MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film*, p. 82

<sup>71</sup> Dawson and Tait, 'Interview: Wollen', p. 35

<sup>72</sup> Keith Kelly, 'Riddles of the Sphinx: One or Two Things About Her', *Millennium Film Journal* 1:2 (Spring, 1978), p. 100

<sup>73</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde', in Mary Jacobus (ed.), *Women Writing and Writing About Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 177-195 and *Framework* 9 (Spring, 1979), pp. 3-10, reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 115-131. Henceforth cited as 'FFA' in the main text

both possible and useful. 'It is now possible to make some tentative assessments of feminist film criticism, find some perspective on the past and discuss directions for the future' ('FFA', 115).<sup>74</sup> Mulvey's is one of several texts in film studies published in 1978 centrally concerned with the interrelation of feminist politics, documentary, theory and experiment – by Pam Cook, Christine Gledhill, Julia Lesage, B. Ruby Rich and a roundtable of filmmakers and writers published in *New German Critique*.<sup>75</sup> These arguments largely take place with reference to two modes of 1970s feminist filmmaking: the documentary approach represented by works such as *Three Lives* (Women's Liberation Cinema/Kate Millett, 1971), *Janie's Janie* (Geri Ashur, 1971) and *The Woman's Film* (San Francisco Newsreel, 1971); and an avant-garde exemplified by films like *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975), *Lives of Performers* and *Riddles of the Sphinx*. The close connection of these writings to film exhibition, as well as the way they comprise a milieu of mutual critique in which the participants knew one another, is indicated by the fact that Cook, Gledhill, Mulvey and Rich all presented versions of their essays as papers at the Feminism and Cinema event at the 1979 Edinburgh Film Festival.<sup>76</sup>

Mulvey's account begins with the women's film festivals of the 1970s. She understands these primarily as a form of historical research, excavating 'surprise

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<sup>74</sup> For a detailed reading of Mulvey's essay with many points of agreement with my own, see Catherine Lupton, 'Discourses of Avant-Gardism in British Film Culture 1966-1979', PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 1996, pp. 82-85

<sup>75</sup> Pam Cook, 'The Point of Expression in Avant-Garde Film', in *Catalogue of British Film Institute Productions, 1977-1978* (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 53-56, reprinted in John Caughie (ed.), *Theories of Authorship* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul/BFI, 1981), pp. 271-281; Christine Gledhill, 'Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3:4 (1978), pp. 457-493; Julia Lesage, 'The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3:4 (1978), pp. 507-523; B. Ruby Rich, 'The Crisis of Naming in Feminist Film Criticism', *Jump Cut* 19 (December, 1978), reprinted as 'In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism', *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 62-84; Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, Judith Mayne, B. Ruby Rich and Anna-Marie Taylor, 'Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics', *New German Critique* 13 (Winter, 1978), pp. 82-107

<sup>76</sup> See Lesley Stern, 'Feminism and Cinema – Exchanges', *Screen* 20:3-4 (Winter, 1979-80), pp. 89-105

finds and lost women directors’, an interpretation which, though not inaccurate, minimises the festivals’ importance as forms of feminist organising and community (Rich, in contrast, details whether or not certain festivals were organised collectively, for instance).<sup>77</sup> In any case, the pattern that was revealed by such film archaeology is familiar from the programme essay for the Women’s Event at the 1972 Edinburgh Film Festival, co-written with Claire Johnston and Lynda Myles: the virtually complete exclusion of women from filmmaking in classical Hollywood and the relatively greater opportunities for women in the avant-garde (‘FFA’, 118 and 120). This historical narrative has the character of background support for the theoretical arguments in favour of the ‘objective alliance’ of feminism and the avant-garde later in the essay.

As Mulvey points out, 1972 was the year of the first issue of *Women and Film*, as well as special issues of other North American film magazines *Velvet Light Trap* and *Take One*.<sup>78</sup> In her account, such early feminist writing about film was of the kind elsewhere labelled ‘images of women’ criticism, defined by ‘concentrating on the sexist *content* of cinematic narrative and exploitation of women as *images*’. In Mulvey’s argument, this approach was ‘a necessary polemic (similar politically to campaigns against sexism in advertising or role-indoctrination in children’s books)’, from which two demands arose: first, for positive, ‘stronger and more independent’ female role models on screen; second, for realistic images of women to counter the myths and stereotypes of patriarchal cinema. Yet despite its indispensability, Mulvey claims, such a critique was trapped in the terms of the ‘dominant’ cinema –

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<sup>77</sup> Rich, ‘In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism’, p. 64

<sup>78</sup> *Women and Film* was based in California and published five issues between 1972 and 1975. See the archive in *Jump Cut* 57 (Fall, 2016), online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/WomenAndFilm/index.html> (accessed 2 January 2017). *Velvet Light Trap* 6 (Fall, 1972) (special issue on ‘Sexual Politics and Film’); *Take One* 3:2 (February, 1972) (special issue on ‘Women in Film’)

in its emphasis on content it reflected narrative cinema's habitual effacement of formal devices in order to let character and story manifest themselves unimpeded, while in its demand for positive and realistic female figures it remained caught in a model of cinema structured around viewer identification ('FFA', 119), which Mulvey had dissected and rejected in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.

This early feminist film criticism found its analogue in women's movement documentary filmmaking, which paralleled its strengths and weaknesses.<sup>79</sup> Positively, 'it is hard to overestimate the vigour and immediacy of some of these films' ('FFA', 122), their 'heady excitement', as '[f]or the first time ever, films were being made exclusively by women, about women and feminist politics, for other women' ('FFA', 121). *Three Lives*, in which three women speak directly to camera about their lives in a manner reminiscent of a consciousness raising group, 'captures the tone of and quality of relationships and significant conversation between women', as a passage Mulvey quotes from *Women and Film* indicates ('FFA', 121).<sup>80</sup> Yet these political merits are offset by conceptual weakness. First, the content-centric aesthetic exemplified by 'images of women' criticism is exacerbated by the claims of the *cinema vérité* tradition within which many of these feminist documentarians work:<sup>81</sup> *cinema vérité* conceives the camera as 'an instrument of truth itself, grasping the real, unmediated by ideology' ('FFA', 121), and as such this cinema is allegedly again 'bound by a concept of film as a transparent medium' ('FFA', 122), ignoring the role of technology and formal conventions in mediating

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<sup>79</sup> Mulvey's only explicit reference is to *Three Lives*, but it is clear that a number of films are being alluded to. Aside from this and *Janie's Janie* and *The Woman's Film*, the background to Mulvey's argument comprises works like *Joyce at 34* (Joyce Chopra, 1972), *Anything You Want to Be* (Liane Brandon, 1971), *Growing Up Female* (Julia Reichert and Jim Klein, 1971) and *I Am Somebody* (Madeline Anderson, 1970)

<sup>80</sup> Susan Rice, 'Three Lives', *Women and Film* 1 (1972), p. 66

<sup>81</sup> Joyce Chopra, for instance, worked with Richard Leacock. See Shilyh Warren, 'By, For, and About: The "Real" Problem in the Feminist Film Movement', *Mediascape* (Fall, 2008), online at [http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Fall08\\_Warren.pdf](http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Fall08_Warren.pdf) (last accessed 9 January, 2018), p. 15n33

reality. Second, in their desire to '[register] typical shared experiences' in order to 'create political unity' between women on screen and in the audience, such works are still premised on the psychological structure of identification, 'the old endless search for the other self on screen' ('FFA', 122). Thus, while Mulvey is not ungenerous to the writers and filmmakers of the early part of the decade, stating that 'no leap forward could be conceived without this first spring-board', the approach of these pioneers is understood to have quickly exhausted its possibilities ('FFA', 122).

What now emerge in the essay are theory as necessary to advance feminist film criticism and avant-garde strategies as a way out of the blockage of feminist documentary. A trio of theoretical paradigms made themselves felt in feminist writing on cinema in the mid-1970s. First, Althusser-inspired arguments in film theory in which the account of ideology as a set of illusory representations and a fixing in place of the subject was recoded into a critique of realist aesthetics were taken up. 'The realist aesthetics used means to entrap the spectator similar to those of bourgeois ideology itself', Mulvey affirms ('FFA', 125). Feminist appropriation could bring such a critique to bear on the cognate field of patriarchal ideology. Second, semiotics, with its emphasis on the unmotivated character of signification, its denaturalisation of representation, could grant feminism a 'theoretical advance from investigating language and the production of meaning' ('FFA', 126). This, too, came into the orbit of, and reinforced, the attack on realism.<sup>82</sup> Third, psychoanalysis, tracing the neurotic reality behind innocent appearances, enabled feminist critics to decode the inscription of male fears and fantasies into cinematic images of women that initially seemed to be positive (as in Cook and Johnston's text on Raoul Walsh)

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<sup>82</sup> See, for instance, Claire Johnston's remark that 'cinema involves the production of signs, [therefore] the idea of non-intervention is pure mystification'. Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Vol. I* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 214



and into structures of the look and narrative, through which the viewer is positioned (as pinpointed in ‘Visual Pleasure’) (‘FFA’, 126-127).

As well as unseating the assumptions of earlier film criticism, and any filmmaking premised on similar notions, this triumvirate of approaches sets out the terms of a radical cinematic counter-practice. This will not primarily focus on producing representations of women that accurately reflect reality, but on a deliberate reworking and modulating of film form to dismantle oppressive modes of looking, surreptitious encodings of patriarchal ideology into representation, and so on. The way is open, in other words, for a counter-cinematic avant-garde. Thus, in the final part of the essay, subtitled ‘The search for a practice’, Mulvey argues that feminism can look there for an inventory of devices: ‘feminists have recently come to see the modernist avant-garde as relevant to their own struggle to develop a radical approach to art’ (‘FFA’, 116). Such appropriation, drawing on the investigations of recent North American and European structural film (‘FFA’, 128), repurposes the original techniques. Joyce Wieland’s *Hand Tinting* (1968), for instance, exemplifies structural film’s interest in what Lauren Rabinovitz calls its ‘deconstruction of cinema’s formalist and material features’,<sup>83</sup> yet by doing so in a manner that extends Wieland’s early artistic experiments with quilting (dyeing the film, making holes in it with needles) Wieland’s work imbues these devices with political content, gesturing to a suppressed history of women’s crafts (see ‘FFA’, 129). Annabel Nicolson’s *Reel Time* (1973), mentioned by Mulvey, takes expanded cinema’s preoccupation with the projection event and inflects it in relation to the feminine-coded labour of sewing, as the film strip moves on a loop through both the

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<sup>83</sup> Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-1971*, second edition (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 168

projector and a sewing machine operated by the artist. *Reel Time* disrupts the cinematic apparatus, reorganising the space of film exhibition and calling attention to the artist and her labour.<sup>84</sup>

With its embeddedness in a specific film culture at a particular moment, its schematism, its concluding remarks on the author's own filmmaking, Mulvey's text resembles 'The Two Avant-Gardes', which also delineated a historical trajectory in order to initiate a program of political filmmaking. The directors Mulvey endorses – as well as Wieland and Nicolson, Mulvey looks to Akerman and Rainer – overlap closely with Wollen's 'third avant-garde'.<sup>85</sup> The reason for this is evident: the demands of the women's movement necessitate both the politicisation of formal innovation *and* the irreducible persistence of subject matter, the latter of which can never be entirely expunged by feminist works.<sup>86</sup> Mulvey states the matter as follows: 'women cannot be satisfied with an aesthetics that restricts counter-cinema to work on form alone. Feminism is bound to its politics; its experimentation cannot exclude work on content' ('FFA', 128). The harmony with 'The Two Avant-Gardes' is made explicit when Mulvey mentions Wollen's essay in the next sentence.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> For more extensive discussions see Lucy Reynolds, 'Re-interpreting *Reel Time*', *Art In-sight* 24 (2004), pp. 10-13, and Amy Tobin, 'Moving Pictures: Intersections Between Art, Film and Feminism in the 1970s', *Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRA)* 4:1-2 (December, 2015), p. 128

<sup>85</sup> In the 1974 Mulvey and Wollen interview in *Screen*, Wollen cites Wieland's films, specifically *Solidarity* and *Pierre Vallières*, in the same breath as Rainer, noting both as an influence on *Penthesilea*. This immediately follows mention of Akerman and Raynal, and precedes the claim that Mulvey and Wollen sought to blur the positions of North American and European avant-gardes, both suggesting that Wieland figures in Wollen's conception of the third avant-garde. See Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons' (interview with Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen), *Screen*, 15:3 (Autumn 1974), pp. 126-127. With respect to Nicolson, even if one were to query positioning her under the rubric of the third avant-garde, *Reel Time*'s investigation of the moving image's forms and apparatus and superimposition of these onto political concerns is characteristic of Wollen's notion of the third avant-garde. One might see Mulvey's inclusion of her in the essay as an attempt to expand the remit of the 'third avant-garde' aesthetic, specifically to other women filmmakers

<sup>86</sup> See also Kaplan, *Women and Film*, pp. 86-87

<sup>87</sup> Mulvey's argument about the necessity of subject matter parallels Pam Cook's insistence on the continued importance of personal expression in even the most theoretically sophisticated feminist works. Cook, 'Point of Expression', p. 272

In Mulvey's argument, the 'alternative' – whether documentary or avant-garde – is always lashed to the 'dominant' cinema, to which it is not merely separate but in a relationship of opposition, negating it. It forms a counter cinema. 'An important aspect of avant-garde aesthetics is negation', Mulvey asserts; 'a work is formed, or driven to find a position, by the very code of the dominant tradition that is being opposed' ('FFA', 128). The mediating term between these two poles is criticism or theory, which on one reading appears to straightforwardly dictate the character of a counter-practice based on the analysis of mainstream cinema. This position may certainly be found in the work of others in Mulvey's milieu – in a more forthright, polemical form in the writing of Claire Johnston, for instance. In a collaborative text with Paul Willemen the following year, Johnston states that '[f]ar from the critique of classic Hollywood cinema being made at the expense of focussing on political or avant-garde cinema, we see the analysis of text construction, representation and other such processes [...] as being the only possible foundation for any aesthetic-political vanguard film-making in Britain today'.<sup>88</sup>

Yet on another interpretation the conception that predominates in Mulvey's essay is more elastic and two-sided, as theory must also look to avant-garde filmmakers like Nicolson or Akerman to see its ideas worked through cinematically. Rewriting Kant's dictum (part of his much earlier attempt to overcome a pre-existing binary, between empiricism and rationalism), we can say that for Mulvey theory without avant-garde practice is empty, the avant-garde without theoretical guidance is blind. It makes sense then that Mulvey selects one event of the late

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<sup>88</sup> Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, 'Introduction', in Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen (eds.), *Jacques Tourneur* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival, 1975), p. 6. Similar remarks may be found, for example, in Pam Cook and Claire Johnston, 'The Place of Woman in the Cinema of Raoul Walsh', in Phil Hardy (ed.), *The Cinema of Raoul Walsh* (London: Edinburgh Film Festival/BFI, 1974), p. 107; and Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema', p. 215

1970s as crystallising the meeting between feminism and the avant-garde: the presentation by three editors of *Camera Obscura*, a Californian ‘journal of feminism and film theory’ (to use the self-description on the cover of early issues) whose first issue was in 1976, at the London Film-Makers’ Co-op (LFMC), the organisational hub of British experimental cinema, in 1978.<sup>89</sup> As Mulvey explains, she was ‘struck by the historic conjuncture between feminist film theory, the *Camera Obscura* presentation, and the Co-op, home of avant-gardist film practice. This was a meeting, I felt, which could not until recently have taken place. It seemed to be a concrete indication, or mutual recognition, of a growing two-way traffic’ (‘FFA’, 124).

Indeed, ‘Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde’ manifests throughout *Camera Obscura*’s influence on, and simultaneity with, Mulvey’s ideas. Speaking of the event at the LFMC, Mulvey notes her realisation there of the parallels between the arguments put forward by the editorial collective and the ideas she was evolving for the essay (‘FFA’, 124). The three major theoretical trends Mulvey identifies – Althusserian Marxism, semiotics and psychoanalysis – are spotlighted in the editorial to the first issue of *Camera Obscura* as providing the methodological precepts for feminist film theory.<sup>90</sup> The feminist avant-garde Mulvey advocates is closely related to filmmakers explored in early issues of *Camera Obscura*: Jackie Raynal, Rainer, Marguerite Duras, Babette Mangolte. Similarly, Mulvey’s twin criticisms of feminist documentary may be discerned in the introduction to an interview with Yvonne Rainer in the same issue, in which the writers outline their

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<sup>89</sup> For a brief description of the event, see Anonymous, ‘Editorial: Feminism, Fiction and the Avant-Garde’, *Camera Obscura* 3-4 (Summer, 1979), pp. 3-4

<sup>90</sup> Anonymous, ‘Feminism and Film: Critical Approaches’, *Camera Obscura* 1 (Fall, 1976), pp. 5 and 7

opposition to assumptions perceived in *Janie's Janie*. First, they attack the belief that cinema can be a neutral window on reality:

This film, and many feminist films which follow its example, share a similar tendency to treat film as a medium of transparency. The old fallacy that the camera doesn't lie was taken over as a stock-in-trade tool by women who were trying to de-naturalize sexism in other cultural and social institutions, but failed to recognize the fundamental problem of de-naturalizing conventional filmic construction itself. Documentary, in particular, was often seen as an innocent form.<sup>91</sup>

Second, they disparage empathy and state that they have 'come to question the political effectiveness of films which [depend] on emotional identification with characters'.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, *Camera Obscura's* perspective in early issues was formed, in part, out of a constellation of ideas stemming from the work of feminist intellectuals based in the UK including Mulvey, Cook, Johnston, Jacqueline Rose and Kari Hanet, a debt that is made explicit in the first issue's editorial.<sup>93</sup> The influence of 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' is writ large, for example, in *Camera Obscura's* opposition to emotional identification.

Problematically, however, Mulvey interprets the dispute which led to four associate editors of *Women and Film* leaving the magazine to found *Camera Obscura* as emblematic of the transition from the first stage of feminist thought about cinema to the second: '[t]hey broke with *Women and Film* on the grounds that feminism had to move beyond the first spring-board – the basic critique of sexism and the affirmation of women's lost tradition – and search for new images' ('FFA', 124). Yet Clarissa Jacob's research on *Women and Film* shows this to be an

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<sup>91</sup> Anonymous, 'Yvonne Rainer: An Introduction', *Camera Obscura* 1 (Fall, 1976), p. 60

<sup>92</sup> Anonymous, 'Yvonne Rainer: An Introduction', pp. 60 and 59

<sup>93</sup> Anonymous, 'Feminism and Film: Critical Approaches', pp. 3-4

incomplete picture on several counts.<sup>94</sup> First, by its later issues, *Women and Film* was tentatively beginning to incorporate articles that manifested the influence of film theory and interrogated the critical and aesthetic assumptions that had subtended preceding feminist film criticism.<sup>95</sup> Second, though *Women and Film*'s engagement with the avant-garde was considerably more intermittent and less assured than *Camera Obscura*'s, the increasing presence of this subject matter in later issues of *Women and Film* suggests it too was engaged in a 'search for new images'.<sup>96</sup> Third, crucially, the split itself might be understood as organisational as much as theoretical, as Janet Bergstrom, Sandy Flitterman, Elisabeth Hart Lyon and Constance Penley wished to turn the magazine into a collective.<sup>97</sup> The 1975 letter from the resignees to the feminist newspaper *Plexus* does not mention theory (although it may well be that the original *Women and Film* editors resisted collectivity so that theory would not become the magazine's dominant tendency).<sup>98</sup>

One might also question, at this point, other aspects of Mulvey's narrative. Though the final section of her essay is merely a sketch of recent filmmakers rather than an exhaustive account, 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde' unfortunately

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<sup>94</sup> See Clarissa Jacob's general introduction, and her prefaces to individual issues, in the previously cited *Women and Film* archive, *Jump Cut* 57

<sup>95</sup> Excluding Constance Penley, who went on to co-found *Camera Obscura*, one can point to Julia Lesage, 'Feminist Film Criticism: Theory and Practice', *Women and Film* 5-6 (1974), pp. 12-18, or Eileen McGarry, 'Documentary, Realism & Women's Cinema', *Women and Film* 7 (Summer, 1975), pp. 50-59

<sup>96</sup> See, for instance, Chuck Kleinhans, 'Lives of Performers', *Women and Film* 5-6, pp. 52-54; William van Wert, 'Germaine Dulac: First Feminist Filmmaker', *Women and Film* 5-6, pp. 55-57; Marjorie Keller, 'Report from Knokke: Exprmentl-5', *Women and Film* 7, pp. 28-33

<sup>97</sup> Jacob, 'Introduction'. (Janet Bergstrom is listed as Janet Parker in *Women and Film*.) Whether the move was a genuine bid for collectivity, or a failed attempt at a hostile takeover, is something I leave open. For the latter view, see B. Ruby Rich, 'Prologue. Knokke-Heist and the Fury That Was Edinburgh', *Chick Flicks*, p. 161; for the former, see the account of the journal thirty years later written by its then-current editorial collective: '[t]he four founders left *Women and Film* after two years because they wanted to engage with theoretical issues that were beyond the scope of the magazine and to experiment with the ideals of collective work'. Amelie Hastie, Lynne Joyrich, Patricia White and Sharon Willis, '(Re)Inventing *Camera Obscura*', in Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (eds.), *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 302

<sup>98</sup> *Plexus* 1:13 (February, 1975), unpaginated

contributed to a narrowing of cinematic references for feminist film theory. Rabinovitz notes how works by Rainer, Akerman, Mulvey and Wollen and later, Sally Potter's *Thriller* (1979) and *The Gold Diggers* (1983) became 'privileged examples of woman's cinema as a feminist practice engaged in an extensive dialogue with critical theory'. Though these were fertile works, 'their valorization to the exclusion of others smack[ed] of a new essentializing, albeit feminist, canon'.<sup>99</sup> Even within the relatively small category of women's avant-garde or counter-cinema one can enumerate several areas of contemporary filmmaking left out of Mulvey's account: the collective filmmaking of the London Women's Film Group (even though, through Tammes and Johnston, Mulvey had personal connections to this collective); the work in Germany and Austria of VALIE EXPORT, Helke Sander and Ulrike Ottinger; and the romantic, sensuous and bodily vein of experimental film represented by Carolee Schneemann.<sup>100</sup> Nor do the filmmakers Mulvey does cite always fit neatly into the frame she makes for them. While Mulvey argues against empathy as a politically productive mode of film spectatorship, for instance, Rainer – one of Mulvey's chief examples – defended *Film About a Woman Who...* (1974) in just such terms, stating that 'I was interested in plain old Aristotelian catharsis. I wanted the audience to be swept away with pity'.<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, Mulvey doesn't mention independent distribution, production and exhibition, surely a crucial parallel and possibility for alliance between the

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<sup>99</sup> Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, p. 31. See Warren, 'By, For, and About', p. 5, for the same argument

<sup>100</sup> Schneemann herself remarks that '*Fuses* was being shown in London, in 1968, 1969, and through the early seventies when I lived there – as Mulvey began writing her film essays. She talked to me about the rupture *Fuses* made in pornography – how important *Fuses* was as an erotic vision. It was going to change the whole argument and discussion of filmic representation of sexuality and ... then she couldn't touch it! Mulvey has never mentioned my films. But perhaps it was a touchstone behind critical theory for Mulvey. We were there at the same time, at the same moment, in parallel'. Carolee Schneemann, 'Interview with Kate Haug', *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2003), p. 27

<sup>101</sup> Anonymous, 'Yvonne Rainer: Interview', *Camera Obscura* 1 (Fall, 1976), p. 80

women's movement and avant-garde, since both faced problems funding and disseminating their works. Just as the 1960s saw the foundation of organisations dedicated to experimental cinema like the Film-Makers' Co-op in New York, the LFMC, Canyon Cinema in San Francisco and XSCREEN in Cologne, so in the 1970s New Day Films, Women Make Movies and Iris Films began distributing feminist works.<sup>102</sup> UK-based women's film distributors Cinema of Women and Circles (the latter a breakaway from the LFMC) were not founded until 1979,<sup>103</sup> the year after the original presentation of 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde', but it is hard not to read the absence of any institutional dimension as an example of Mulvey's valuation of theoretical and cinematic texts at the expense of the material infrastructure grounding cultural production.<sup>104</sup>

Despite its omissions and limitations, by the early 1980s Mulvey's account and others like it had become the received narrative of feminist cinema; as writers like Shilyh Warren and B. Ruby Rich argue, by this time a methodological and conceptual orthodoxy had asserted itself.<sup>105</sup> This is vividly illustrated by two surveys of the field published at this point, Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures* and E. Ann Kaplan's *Women and Film*, both of which trace a double trajectory, a teleology leading away from the pioneers of sociological feminist film criticism to a psychoanalytic and semiotic theory of subject construction and enunciation, and

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<sup>102</sup> In 1971, 1972 and 1975, respectively

<sup>103</sup> See Lucy Reynolds, "'Whose History?'" Feminist Advocacy and Experimental Film and Video', in Sue Clayton and Laura Mulvey (eds.), *Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and Experimental Film in the 1970s* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 138 and 146-147; Katy Deepwell, 'Felicity Sparrow: Forming Circles', *n.paradoxa* 34 (2014), pp. 86-95; and Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), pp. 84-92

<sup>104</sup> For an account of the determinate role on women's art and film production in the 1970s of the organisations, networks, exhibition spaces and reading groups that emerged from the women's movement in Britain, see Tobin, 'Moving Pictures', especially pp. 120 and 129-130

<sup>105</sup> Warren, 'By, For, and About', p. 7; B. Ruby Rich, 'Prologue. Attacking the Sisters, or the Limits of Disagreement' and 'Cinefeminism and its Discontents', *Chick Flicks*, pp. 287 and 291-298



away from documentary to avant-garde. (Kuhn and Kaplan have the virtue, however, of making explicit a spatial dimension submerged in Mulvey's chronological account, between North America – the criticism of *Women and Film*, the US feminist documentaries of the early 1970s – and Britain – the writings of Cook, Mulvey and Johnston, of course, but paradoxically *Camera Obscura* too, with its overt British and French influences.)<sup>106</sup> With the benefit of historical distance, we can see that Mulvey's viewpoint tracks discussions in literature and art history, in the writings of Toril Moi and Griselda Pollock, for instance, both of whom take aim at 'images of women' criticism. Moi's critique of 'early feminist criticism', though acknowledging its necessity as a stepping stone for later scholarship, disparages its emphasis on literature as reproduction of reality rather than textual production and its demand for female role models.<sup>107</sup> Both Moi and Pollock, like Mulvey, propose that semiotic and psychoanalytic models hold more potential.<sup>108</sup>

Yet if we return at this point to the texts by Lesage, Rich and Gledhill that I mentioned at the beginning of this section, a different picture emerges, one that shows not consensus and linear progression but disagreement and unevenness. Gledhill's sweeping survey of feminist film theory up to 1978 pinpoints not only its advances but its lacunae and blind spots – its drift towards a focus on the internal manoeuvres of cinematic works that ducks its vocation to relate them to social reality, its underestimation of the spectator's role in determining the ideological effectivity of films – depicting the relationship between the women's movement and

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<sup>106</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and the Cinema*, second edition (London and New York: Verso, 1994), pp. 73-74; Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 125

<sup>107</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 45 and 47

<sup>108</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'What's Wrong with "Images of Women"?', in *Framing Feminism*, p. 133, originally published in *Screen Education* 24 (1977), pp. 25-33. The very format of Moi's book conveys this idea, structured as it is into a first, critical section on Anglo-American criticism and a second, more positive section on French feminist writers, culminating in the work of Kristeva

avant-garde as more contradictory and antagonistic than in Mulvey's version.<sup>109</sup> Lesage's essay works against the monolithic dismissal of feminist documentaries through fine-grained analysis, illustrating these documentaries' modification of the *cinema vérité* tradition.<sup>110</sup> Rich provides some of the historical substance necessary for a materialist understanding of the move towards the valuation of theory and avant-gardism, for instance the shift of much criticism and practice away from activism and the increased institutionalisation in universities of both film studies and women's studies.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, in the various, positive film categories in her typology, Rich reorients the temporal emphasis of Mulvey's argument: 'validative' and 'correspondence' films, roughly analogous to *vérité* and avant-garde respectively, sit side by side, along with 'corrective realism' and others.<sup>112</sup> All these texts escape the binary oppositions and teleological narrative in Mulvey's framing of the issues, offering a more flexible and open political aesthetics.

The above should be seen as the inscription into a feminist problematic of the biggest debate in 1970s film theory, around the political value of each term in the seeming antithesis of realism and modernism, the epicentre of which was *Screen*.<sup>113</sup> The triangle of intellectual paradigms in which Mulvey situates feminist film theory – Althusserian Marxism, semiotics and psychoanalysis – echoes Stephen Heath's aphorism that the project of 1970s radical film theory was 'the encounter of Marxism and psychoanalysis on the terrain of semiotics'.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Pam Cook's

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<sup>109</sup> Gledhill, 'Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism', pp. 460 and 461

<sup>110</sup> Lesage, 'Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary', pp. 509-514 and 521-522

<sup>111</sup> Rich, 'In the Name', p. 65

<sup>112</sup> Rich, 'In the Name', pp. 74-75 and 78

<sup>113</sup> A point Moi makes in reference to the same debate in literature. Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 46. For a discussion of the anti-realist tendency of 1970s film theory in relation to feminism see Christine Gledhill, 'Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism', in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI, 1998), pp. 23-26

<sup>114</sup> Stephen Heath, 'Jaws, Ideology and Film Theory', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Vol. II* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1985), p. 511

critical remarks on realism, for instance (paraphrased by Mulvey as follows: ‘the system of representations generated by the classic Hollywood cinema fixes the spectator in a specific closed relationship to it, obliterating the possibility of experiencing contradiction’ (‘FFA’, 125)),<sup>115</sup> are a reiteration of Colin MacCabe’s statement the year before that ‘the classic realist text (a heavily “closed” discourse) cannot deal with the real in its contradictions and that in the same movement it fixes the subject in a point of view from which everything becomes obvious’.<sup>116</sup> These arguments of the 1970s, whether feminist or not, should be understood in the context of a longer *durée* of political aesthetics, particularly those Marxist arguments of the 1930s that drew in Benjamin, Brecht, Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács. Critical reflection on these earlier debates casts light on the post-1968 film theory that is one of the central subjects of this thesis. Meditating on the exchanges of the 1930s from a later moment, Jameson points up the progressive potential in certain eras of ‘nature’ as a counterweight to the extreme suspicion of naturalising discourses in the political modernist tradition.<sup>117</sup> We can find this reaffirmed by Gledhill in her contemporary intervention in feminist film culture, when she argues that realism ‘is the first recourse of an oppressed group wishing to combat the ideology promulgated by a hegemonic power’ and that ‘the claim to realism can be invoked by forces seeking to preserve or to challenge the status quo’.<sup>118</sup> Seen in the light of this earlier moment, the feminist iteration of the realism-modernism debate is perhaps of greater interest than the more general version of it played out in *Screen*; for like the

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<sup>115</sup> See Pam Cook, ‘Approaching the Work of Dorothy Arzner’, in Claire Johnston (ed.), *Dorothy Arzner: Towards a Feminist Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1975), p. 9

<sup>116</sup> Colin MacCabe, ‘Realism and the Cinema’, p. 16

<sup>117</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Reflections in Conclusion’, in Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), pp. 206-207. See also Terry Eagleton, ‘Aesthetics and Politics’, *New Left Review* I/ 107 (January/February, 1978), pp. 21-24

<sup>118</sup> Gledhill, ‘Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism’, pp. 462-463

wrangles of the 1930s, it takes place against the background of, and is answerable to, a living political movement, in which many of the theorists and artists were participants.

### **‘And the words? Look’:<sup>119</sup> Signification, Ontology, Material**

In this final section on Wollen’s writings I explore the theoretical questions raised in his work of the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s. Wollen defines the central issues in these works in typically binary fashion when he speaks of ‘the problem of the relationship between an ontology of cinema – albeit perhaps a materialist ontology – and language or semiotic’. This, he argues, ‘whether openly stated or not, underlies the theory and practice of every theorist and film-maker’ (‘OM’, 192).<sup>120</sup> This problem had actually been suggested as far back as 1968’s ‘Cinema – Code and Image’, with its titular opposition of cinematic signification (‘code’) and the primarily indexical character of film’s cellular form, the photograph (‘image’). I investigate this question with particular reference to the two essays in which Wollen approaches these matters directly: “‘Ontology” and “Materialism” in Film’, published in 1976, and ‘The Field of Language in Film’ in 1981.<sup>121</sup> The inconsistent positions Wollen takes up on these matters undergird, and yet sometimes contradict, the historical narrative set out in ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’, and in Mulvey and Wollen’s filmmaking practice. By placing this discussion next to *Riddles of the*

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<sup>119</sup> ‘Et les mots? Voir.’ Dialogue from *Comment ça va?* (Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, 1976)

<sup>120</sup> Peter Wollen, “‘Ontology” and “Materialism” in Film’, *Screen* 17:1 (Spring, 1976), pp. 7-23. Originally presented at a symposium organised by *Diacritics* at Cornell University in April 1975. References are to the reprint in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 189-207, given in the text under the abbreviation ‘OM’

<sup>121</sup> Rodowick provides an exceptionally detailed and incisive deconstruction of both these essays in *Crisis*, pp. 152-179. My own concern is instead with articulating the connections and disjunctures between these theoretical arguments, and Wollen’s aesthetic demands and filmmaking practice

*Sphinx* and Mulvey's writing on the avant-garde, I wish to suggest the connections between these contemporaneous explorations – in theory and practice – of the politics of cinematic experiment.

““Ontology” and “Materialism”” begins from a simultaneous critique of Bazin (who will function as an exemplar of a realist cinematic ontology, reaffirming and extending Wollen's earlier critique of realism) and various North American critics whom Wollen views as working in the ambit defined by Clement Greenberg's account of modernism (who will represent a modernist ontology). In ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’, Bazin sought to comprehend cinema by focusing on what he took to be its basic unit, the photograph. As I noted in chapter one, the indexicality of the photograph led to his well-known analogies between photographs and the shroud of Turin, death masks and fingerprints.<sup>122</sup> The camera's ability to reproduce reality through ‘a natural process of registration’ minimising human intervention conditioned Bazin's arguments, as Wollen observes, that ‘the ontology of the photographic image was inseparable from the ontology of its model’ and even, in more extreme formulations, ‘that it was identical to it’ (‘OM’, 189).<sup>123</sup> Hence Bazin's realist aesthetic. In light of the above, Wollen argues, Bazin's acknowledgment that ‘[o]n the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language’ could only be antithetical. As Wollen points out, language indicates ‘the passage from nature to culture, the intervention of human agency’; if film's essential vocation is the automatic replication of the physical world, language – a coded, conventional system – must be an unfortunate impediment (‘OM’, 190). In Bazin's

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<sup>122</sup> André Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’, *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 12, 14 and 15

<sup>123</sup> ‘The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it’. Bazin, ‘Ontology’, p. 14

film theory, then, there is an ‘inverse relationship’ between ontology and language, as Wollen puts it (‘OM’, 206). (The ambiguities in Wollen’s use of the term ‘language’ will be discussed below.)

Meanwhile, there is an avant-garde tendency, according to Wollen, to turn the ontological impulse inward. Wollen notes the phenomenological practice of claiming experimental films as mimeses of mental states or metaphors for consciousness (‘OM’, 192-193). More pertinent for his argument, though, is a trend in writings by Regina Cornwell, Paul Sharits and Annette Michelson, which doubles back the question of ontology onto cinema itself, with film functioning as an exploration of properties specific to the medium (‘OM’, 193-194).<sup>124</sup> Cornwell, for example, speaks of how ‘[j]ust as painters have been preoccupied with what the essential properties of their art are, and with all the problems, solutions, and possibilities evolving out of that, a similar tendency is manifested in much recent film’.<sup>125</sup> The train of thought in such statements is derived from Greenberg, as Wollen notes. Greenberg speaks of how ‘the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium. [...] Thereby each art would be rendered “pure”’. [...] Realistic, illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art’.<sup>126</sup> Wollen specifies weak and strong variants of such a reflexive ontology. First, there is a paring down of film to what Metz would call the

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<sup>124</sup> See the following, all cited by Wollen: Regina Cornwell, ‘Some Formalist Tendencies in the Current Avant-Garde Film’, *Studio International* 184:948 (October, 1972), p. 111; Annette Michelson, ‘Paul Sharits and the Critique of Illusionism’, in Yann Beauvais (ed.), *Paul Sharits* (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2008), p. 32, originally in *Projected Images* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1974); Paul Sharits, ‘Words Per Page’, *Afterimage* 4 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 28-29

<sup>125</sup> Cornwell, ‘Some Formalist Tendencies’, p. 111

<sup>126</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’, in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Maldon, Oxford, Victoria, Berlin: Blackwell, 2003), p. 775. This passage is cited in Cornwell, ‘Some Formalist Tendencies’, p. 111, and (partially) by Wollen (‘OM’, 193)

specifically cinematic codes, a purification that aims ‘to expel the non-cinematic codes, leaving the residue called film’ (‘OM’, 197, 206).<sup>127</sup> Second, there is a more extreme reduction of these codes to their material – optical or photo-chemical – substrate (‘OM’, 196-197, 206).<sup>128</sup> In both cases, filmmaking is induced to move away from the goal of reproduction, since photographic reproduction always introduces a signified external to cinema’s own devices and materials (‘OM’, 197). Language and ontology are not in contradiction here but are coterminous: in a reflexive practice, film’s codes and processes become its privileged signified (‘OM’, 199-200).<sup>129</sup>

What are Wollen’s problems with this position? First, its involution, its ‘ever-narrowing preoccupation with pure film, with film “about” film’, excludes a wider material reality and history (‘OM’, 196).<sup>130</sup> Wollen is extremely concerned to guard against a terminological slide from the *materiality* of the film object to political *materialism* (in the sense of historical materialism). As Wollen points out, Michelson connects the materiality of Stan Brakhage (whose work on the filmstrip, she argues, anticipates the reflexive, ontological turn inaugurated by structural film), to ‘the post-Brechtian aesthetic of European theater and cinema’ of Godard and Huillet and Straub (‘OM’, 195).<sup>131</sup> Brakhage describes his foregrounding of filmic materials as ‘operating aesthetically as a kind of kickback or kick-spectator out of

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<sup>127</sup> See Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1974), pp. 39-40

<sup>128</sup> This semiotic distinction between a code and a material of expression is given in Metz, *Language and Cinema*, p. 36

<sup>129</sup> Significantly, both Michelson and Sharits discuss Bazin in their writing. See Annette Michelson, ‘What is Cinema?’ by André Bazin’, *Artforum* 6:10 (Summer, 1968), pp. 67-71, and Sharits, ‘Words Per Page’, p. 28

<sup>130</sup> This is one of the central reasons for Wollen’s disagreement with Peter Gidal, as can be seen in ‘OM’, 196, and Peter Gidal, ‘Letter to Screen’, *Flare Out: Aesthetics 1966-2016*, ed. Peter Gidal and Mark Webber (London: The Visible Press, 2016), p. 240

<sup>131</sup> Michelson, ‘Paul Sharits’, p. 33

escapist wrap-up'.<sup>132</sup> One might see a parallel here, Wollen allows, with Brecht's critique of theatrical illusion. However, as Wollen remarks, Brecht used similar techniques for profoundly different ends. Where Brakhage speaks of highlighting 'the artifice, the art',<sup>133</sup> Brecht jolts the spectator in order to see social reality anew – with its domination, exploitation, contradiction and contingency ('OM', 201-202). Brecht arrived therefore at a non-naturalist representation that didn't aim to show the surface of reality but uncovered the levers of capitalist society and drew attention to the possibility of change ('OM', 201-202), an advanced, anti-illusionist form of representation, for which Brecht used the metaphors of his plays as pictures, diagrams and demonstrations ('OM', 201 and 223n32).<sup>134</sup> It is in terms of such an emphasis, Wollen argues, that one should situate filmmakers like Godard, Huillet and Straub, and Nagisa Oshima ('OM', 201).

Second, the 'dissolution of signification into objecthood or tautology' ('TAG', 97) militates against producing the conceptual discourse necessary for film to pose political questions. Politics involves ideas, and ideas require language, both verbal and cinematic: 'ideas, therefore language: it is only with a symbolic (rather than iconic) system that concepts can be developed, that there can be contradiction and hence argument'. There are echoes here of Wollen's earlier critique of Soviet productivism, which he also saw as erasing art's signifying dimension. Again, Brecht provides an ideal model for Wollen, since his theatre is one of 'ideas, arguments, judgments' ('OM', 202). In 1980, Wollen will reiterate this in a 1980

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<sup>132</sup> Stan Brakhage, 'A Moving Picture Giving and Taking Book', *Film Culture* 41 (Summer, 1966), p. 47

<sup>133</sup> Brakhage, 'Moving Picture Giving and Taking Book', p. 48. Although Wollen adduces Michelson as an example of 'ontology', elsewhere he notes the importance to her of political 'materialism' as well as 'materiality'

<sup>134</sup> Brecht refers to his epic theatre as a 'picture of the world', for instance. See Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', p. 37



argument with T. J. Clark, making reference to Raymond Williams's development of Brecht's idea of 'complex seeing'.<sup>135</sup> According to Wollen, 'complex seeing' describes 'a multiplicity of semiotic practices, formal devices and points-of-view, distinguishing, for example, the representation of plot from the representation of commentary, or narration of past events from hypotheses about future events, documentary from fiction'. Against 'art dedicated to visual perception, a primarily "retinal" art, in Duchamp's term', Wollen argues that 'the avant-garde has vastly increased the scope of art', offering 'iconic, conceptual and diegetic flexibility', which political art must make use of.<sup>136</sup> Hence the 'complex seeing' of Mulvey and Wollen's theory films, which mobilise heterogeneous devices and forms of communication in order to weave a conceptual discourse with political intent.

Wollen's problem with ontological modernism, in sum, is its exclusion of both reference and meaning. In this respect, his argument, although developed in more abstract terms, is the same as Mulvey's in 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde' – signifying, referential functions are a prerequisite of critical art: 'women cannot be satisfied with an aesthetics that restricts counter-cinema to work on form alone. Feminism is bound to its politics; its experimentation cannot exclude work on content' ('FFA', 128). Wollen's citations of Brecht have, in part, a rhetorical function, since Brecht was a talismanic figure in Wollen's milieu. *Screen* published dedicated Brecht issues in 1974 and 1975, the second of these a tie-in with a Brecht event at the 1975 Edinburgh Film Festival.<sup>137</sup> Brecht's authority – as a committed

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<sup>135</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'The Literarization of the Theatre', *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 44

<sup>136</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Manet: Modernism and Avant-Garde', *Screen* 21:2 (Summer, 1980), p. 24

<sup>137</sup> *Screen* 15:2 (Summer, 1974) and *Screen* 16:4 (Winter, 1975). The second of these collects papers presented at the 'Brecht and the Cinema/Film and Politics' event at the 1975 Edinburgh Film Festival, organised by the board of *Screen*. For further evidence of Brecht's exemplary stature in 1970s radical film theory, see Ben Brewster, 'The Fundamental Reproach (Brecht)', *Ciné-Tracts* 2 (1977), pp. 44-53, and Martin Walsh, *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema*, ed. Keith M. Griffiths (London: BFI, 1981)

communist and modernist artist – helped legitimise a given filmmaking and theory. Brecht's example also allowed Wollen to solve the problem presented by the ontologies of Bazin and reflexive modernism. Both collapse representation into one of its aspects: Bazin, evidently, ontologises the thing represented, in his most extreme moments denying the mediating function played by form and artistic language; in contrast, purist, reflexive modernism reifies the means of representation, in its most severe iterations suppressing reference and meaning in favour of the sheer givenness of art's materials, its objecthood. Brecht, however, indicated the possibility of negotiating between an idealist aesthetic of meaning unmoored from any material basis, a pure reference allegedly independent of signifiers, and the reduction of art's signification to its apparent formal or material essence or base: 'the "modernist" non-objective tradition in painting cannot be seen as the exclusive alternative to the bourgeois realism and representationalism it has ousted' ('OM', 204).

As an alternate route, Wollen reiterates his conception of film-as-text ('OM', 202), which we saw in his *Tel Quel*-influenced arguments of the early 1970s. Yet the earlier understanding has been modified in two respects. First, because of the changed context in which Wollen writes, his attempt to counter what he perceives as the hegemonic Greenbergian modernist discourse of experimental film, Wollen is driven to counterbalance his earlier arguments for the importance of an underrated signifier by stressing the necessity of reference and the signified. Second, the attempt to produce the 'film-text', the investigations of film language and interrogations of ideology he had earlier advocated, must incorporate the researches carried out by the reflexive modernists in the first avant-garde. The latter have advanced further in this regard, he admits, than the second avant-garde. 'The

operations on the signifier that Godard envisages seem limited in the context of American avant-garde cinema', Wollen writes ('OM', 205). As Wollen now summarises, his 'concept of the text does not exclude, indeed is constructed on, the need to produce meaning. It sees meaning, however, as a material and formal problem [...]. This manufacture must not suppress its material substrate, the sensuous activity that is its process of production, but nor is that sensuous activity its own horizon' ('OM', 204).

The rest of Wollen's writings of the second half of the 1970s can now be seen as responding to the positions laid out above. They form a cartography of cinema's multiple elements of image, language, technology, material. Wollen reflects on cinema's cellular form, the photograph, tracing the battle in the history of the art between 'photography of record' and 'pictorial photography' as a version of the realist ontology-modernist ontology antinomy. His own perspective recognises photography's indexicality while also demonstrating the signifying potential of photomontage, captions and narrative photography.<sup>138</sup> In 1980 he plots cinema's underlying technological base, stressing how it is 'heterogeneous' rather than 'a unified technology', a contingent set of interlocking components, materials and techniques 'in the fields of mechanics, optics, chemistry and electronics', varying historically, geographically and institutionally.<sup>139</sup> Extending the critique of materialist ontologies of cinema of the mid-1970s, Wollen argues that the avant-garde fascination with projection, printing, celluloid, chemicals and so on

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<sup>138</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Photography and Aesthetics', *Screen* 19:4 (Winter, 1978), pp. 9-28; Peter Wollen, 'Five Artists Working with Photographs', *Hayward Annual 1979* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979), pp. 87-90

<sup>139</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Cinema and Technology: A Historical Overview', *Readings and Writings*, pp. 176-177. First presented at the 1978 conference at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee on 'The Cinematic Apparatus' and published in Stephen Heath and Teresa de Lauretis (eds.), *The Cinematic Apparatus* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 176-177

can easily be disguised as materialism, since it seems to foreground means of production rather than “images”. Yet implicit within it is an assumption that equipment used for making film is an essential bedrock rather than itself the product of a variety of historical determinations, at the interface where the economies of capital and libido interlock. The forms of matter taken by the technical apparatus of film are determined by the forms taken by the material vicissitudes of labour and instinct, within history (or rather, as history).<sup>140</sup>

Film’s technology cannot serve as an aesthetic foundation, because this technology is itself determined elsewhere, by a larger historical logic of economic and libidinal forces. ‘Cinema and Technology’ illustrates this throughout by showing how the interests of the film industry, principally exhibitors, have governed which technical developments were incorporated into cinema (sound, widescreen, colour) and which were rejected, such as 3D in the 1950s.<sup>141</sup>

Finally, in ‘Introduction to *Citizen Kane*’, ‘*North by Northwest*: A Morphological Analysis’, ‘Hybrid Plots in *Psycho*’ and ‘The Hermeneutic Code’, Wollen will study film’s narrational processes.<sup>142</sup> Decontextualised these studies of classical Hollywood cinema, aided methodologically by the work of the Russian Formalist folklorist Vladimir Propp and the French structural narratologist Gerard Genette, seem out of kilter with Wollen’s avant-gardism in this period.<sup>143</sup> Yet now we can see that as a contribution towards the codification of film’s dominant grammar (for Wollen a narrative grammar: see *SM*, 225), expanding Metz’s *grande syntagmatique* in a similar mode to Raymond Bellour’s work of the same period,

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<sup>140</sup> Wollen, ‘Cinema and Technology’, p. 176

<sup>141</sup> Wollen, ‘Cinema and Technology’, pp. 169, 171-174

<sup>142</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Introduction to *Citizen Kane*’, *Film Reader 1* (1975), pp. 9-15, reprint in *Readings and Writings*, pp. 49-61; Peter Wollen, ‘*North by Northwest*: A Morphological Analysis’, *Film Form 1* (1976), pp. 19-34, reprinted in *Readings and Writings*, pp. 18-33; Peter Wollen, ‘Hybrid Plots in *Psycho*’, *Framework 13* (Autumn, 1980), reprinted in *Readings and Writings*, pp. 34-39; Peter Wollen, ‘The Hermeneutic Code’, *Readings and Writings*, pp. 40-48

<sup>143</sup> Dana Polan, for instance, saw Wollen’s 1975 essay on *Citizen Kane* as a step back from Wollen’s explicit theorisations of text and ideology in the early 1970s. Dana Polan, ‘*Film Reader 1* [review]’, *Journal of the University Film Association* 29:1 (Winter, 1977), p. 37

these attempt to provide some of the theoretical and critical foundation to the counter-cinematic work on signification that radical filmmakers must carry out according to Wollen.<sup>144</sup>

The difficulty with ““Ontology” and “Materialism””, however, is that these matters are structured in terms of the two avant-gardes binary. Wollen clearly intends the ontological modernist discourse to stand in for the first avant-garde. Indeed, in ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’ Wollen had already criticised the first avant-garde as purist and overly-concerned with medium specificity, and outlined the basic argument of ““Ontology” and “Materialism”” in compressed form (TAG, 97). However, although medium specificity and purism can indeed be found in the first avant-garde (with Cornwell’s ‘Some Formalist Tendencies in the Current Avant-Garde Film’ being a paradigmatic example of Greenbergian modernism in film), this first avant-garde is more heterogeneous in its practices and theories than Wollen implies.<sup>145</sup>

In effect, the two avant-gardes function in ““Ontology” and “Materialism”” as a proxy for a more important issue, which will not become explicit until the late 1970s: the critique of ‘modernism’ from the perspective of the ‘avant-garde’, in the senses of these terms articulated most famously by Peter Bürger. For Bürger, the former is the apex of aestheticism or art-for-art’s-sake, defined by ‘the ever-increasing concentration the makers of art bring to the medium itself’, while the latter is an explicit attack on the institution of autonomous art, seeking to collapse the boundary between art and social praxis and undermine individualistic modes of

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<sup>144</sup> See particularly Bellour’s discussion of extending Metz’s method in Raymond Bellour, ‘Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis’ (interview with Janet Bergstrom), *Camera Obscura* 3-4 (Summer, 1979), pp. 86-87; and Raymond Bellour, ‘To Segment/To Analyze (on *Gigi*)’, trans. Diana Matias, *The Analysis of Film*, ed. Constance Penley (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 196-197

<sup>145</sup> Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, p. 17

artistic production and reception.<sup>146</sup> At least up until ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’, Wollen makes no significant conceptual distinction between ‘avant-garde’ and ‘modernism’ – both experimental film traditions are described interchangeably as avant-garde and modernist. At the same time, his account of the two avant-gardes embodies key elements of Bürger’s distinction, in Wollen’s allusion to the medium-specific concerns of the first, for instance, and his reference to the denunciations of ‘the “Co-op avant-garde” as hopelessly involved with the established art world and its values’ by the second (‘TAG’, 92). By the late 1970s, the modernist/avant-garde differentiation is explicitly deployed in his writing.<sup>147</sup> It appears most clearly in Wollen’s 1981 reassessment of ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’, published in *Framework*. Similarly to Bürger, he distinguishes there between ‘modernism’, ‘concerned with reflexivity (film as film, film about film) and semiotic reduction (foregrounding one category of signifier, or more radically, of the material substrate; movement towards suppression or suspension of the signified)’, and ‘avant-garde’, which ‘is not purist, rejects ontological presuppositions or investigations, and is concerned with semiotic expansion (mixed media, montage of different codes, signs and semiotic registers, heterogeneity of signifiers and signifieds)’. But, as Wollen acknowledges, he was too quick in earlier writing to identify these with the first and second avant-gardes. The first avant-garde had both modernist and avant-garde tendencies, he now admits, as is visible from the influence of Fluxus and Marcel Duchamp on the New American Cinema, for instance.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 27, 53

<sup>147</sup> Wollen, ‘Photography and Aesthetics’, p. 27; Wollen, ‘Five Artists’, p. 88

<sup>148</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘The Avant-Gardes: Europe and America’, *Framework* 14 (Spring, 1981). These complexities draw Paul Willemen into the problematic position of simply mapping modernism and avant-garde onto Wollen’s two avant-gardes, in ‘An Avant Garde for the Eighties’, *Framework* 24 (Spring, 1984), p. 55-62

Wollen's arguments across these texts should be framed in terms of a larger critique of Greenberg-style modernism in contemporary art at this time. In the writings of Victor Burgin and Allan Sekula, we see how a perspective situated in the interactions of overlapping semiotic fields, of photography, cinema and various kinds of linguistic discourse, allows the critique of medium-specific modernism. Burgin's writings closely track Wollen's, as Wollen himself was to later narrate.<sup>149</sup> Burgin's 'Modernism in the *Work of Art*', presented at the 1976 Edinburgh Film Festival 'International Forum on Avant-Garde Film', echoes themes in Wollen's writing, such as the insistence on text, the rejection of semiotic purity and the desire for an art that would force the viewer to break out of the Imaginary (to which I will turn shortly).<sup>150</sup> In this essay Burgin also seeks to distinguish, as Wollen does, between object-centric materiality and a wider political materialism, tracing the distinction back to Marx: '[t]he materialism to which [Greenbergian] Modernism lays claim is an undialectical positivism. It is a materialism condemned elsewhere in Marx's short text on Feuerbach in that, "the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively"<sup>151</sup> Burgin's artistic works – which Wollen wrote about at this time – such as *Lei-feng* (1973-74), employ a strategy of inserting theoretical (principally semiotic) and political discourse into photographic images, suggestive of Mulvey and Wollen's films.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Barthes, Hitchcock, Burgin', *Paris/Manhattan: Writings on Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), pp. 219-234. Mulvey also wrote about Burgin in 1983, in 'Dialogue with Spectatorship: Victor Burgin and Barbara Kruger', *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 132-142

<sup>150</sup> Victor Burgin, 'Modernism in the *Work of Art*', in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 19, 20 and 21

<sup>151</sup> Burgin, 'Modernism in the *Work of Art*', p. 25. See Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm> (accessed 10 April 2017)

<sup>152</sup> Wollen discusses Burgin's artistic practice in 'Photography and Aesthetics', p. 19, and 'Five Artists', pp. 89-90

Similarly, in ‘Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary: Notes on the Politics of Representation’ in 1978, Sekula was searching for an artistic practice in which photographic reproduction would be central, formally conscious while escaping the gravitational pull of a purist, Greenberg-style modernism, and which would be adequate to a radical leftist politics. Sekula discerns exactly the trends in photography that Wollen does in ‘Photography and Aesthetics’, published the same year: the opposition between a realist ontology in which the camera is seen as ‘an engine of fact’ working, in Bazinian manner, ‘independently of human practice’ and a fine art photography presented as ‘transcend[ing] its reference to the real world’.<sup>153</sup> Inverting Wollen’s method, Sekula, is situated in photography but looks to film for models, promoting Chris Marker, Godard, and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, whom he views as continuing the Brechtian legacy, as ‘a guide to ideologically self-conscious handling of image and text’.<sup>154</sup> Although Sekula is writing in a US context, he sees European filmmakers as advanced in relation to such a political practice, even remarking that the US-centred direct cinema and structural film are stuck in different sides of the same antinomy – a claim that, as we have seen, Wollen expounded at length in his comparison of realist and modernist ontologies. Strikingly, Sekula comes to near identical conclusions about which artistic strategies should be privileged: it is a work that involves near parity of photograph and text – Martha Rosler’s *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1975) – that Sekula finds exemplary, with its ability to sustain ‘an unrelentingly *metacritical* relation’ to the artistic forms it utilises.

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<sup>153</sup> Allan Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary: Notes on the Politics of Representation’, *The Massachusetts Review* 19:4 (Winter, 1978), pp. 862-863 and 864

<sup>154</sup> Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism’, pp. 869-870



With this mention of text and image we can turn to ‘The Field of Language in Film’.<sup>155</sup> The essay has a heuristic value in that Wollen uses his and Mulvey’s films as examples of how his theories play out, yet it is problematic as well as suggestive. Wollen introduces their films as the negotiation of a binary between the visual and linguistic. On the one hand, there is the tendency to try to make film into ‘a “pure” visual art’ by expelling verbal language as much as possible. On the other hand, there was the option for Mulvey and Wollen to limit themselves to being writers.<sup>156</sup> Mulvey and Wollen’s films situate themselves between these two poles in ‘the interface between image and word’.<sup>157</sup> ‘Verbal language is a crucial component of film, both as signifier and as signified, as crucial as the image’, Wollen states.<sup>158</sup> It is speech, specifically, that concerns Wollen, as he contrasts ‘the graphic inscriptions on the picture track with *the voice on the sound track*’<sup>159</sup> and then goes on to contemplate the use of speech across *Penthesilea*, *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *AMY!*.

There are two reductions here. First, ‘language or semiotic’ as it was used in other texts, has been contracted to verbal language, the ‘word’. Wollen’s earlier writings were often ambiguous in this respect: in texts like “‘Ontology” and “Materialism” in Film’ Wollen used ‘language’ and ‘semiotic’ interchangeably – sometimes language explicitly meant verbal language, at other times the reference was clearly to cinematic codes more broadly. Here though, as Rodowick states, Wollen ‘reduces semiotics to linguistics’.<sup>160</sup> Second, Wollen further constricts verbal

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<sup>155</sup> Wollen, ‘Field of Language’, pp. 53-60

<sup>156</sup> Wollen, ‘Field of Language’, pp. 53-54

<sup>157</sup> Wollen, ‘Field of Language’, p. 54

<sup>158</sup> Wollen, ‘Field of Language’, p. 54

<sup>159</sup> Wollen, ‘Field of Language’, p. 54, my emphasis

<sup>160</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 174

language to speech.<sup>161</sup> The continuing influence of Saussure's 'phonocentrism' is visible here, as Rodowick again identifies.<sup>162</sup> The two reductions are especially curious given that in *Signs and Meaning* Wollen had criticised Saussure's bias towards the symbolic and arbitrary, and towards speech over writing (*SM*, 119). If Wollen now implies that only spoken language can sustain conceptual activity, then the image-track must conversely be understood as a mute, non-symbolic space, made up merely of 'icons and indices'.<sup>163</sup> As Rodowick puts it, there is an 'equation of images with iconic codes and their subsequent banishment from the field of symbolic or discursive activity'.<sup>164</sup>

But Wollen's opposition of word and image is deficient. First, 'word' cannot be counterposed with 'image', since words can appear as images in film, i.e. as text, as Wollen himself acknowledges in the same essay. For this reason Wollen is driven to concentrate on voice rather than words *per se*. Second, *speech* in film cannot be opposed to the indexical and iconic: recorded speech is indexical (it is a registration of the vibrations that make up vocal sound) and iconic (the recording sounds like the speaker in the same way that a photograph looks like the person photographed). Third, *language* cannot be contrasted with index and icon because language itself contains indexical and iconic, as well as symbolic, elements, a point Wollen himself had made in *Signs and Meaning*, citing Jakobson. Fourth, Wollen's formulation of word vs. image elides the distinction between the iconic and indexical in the category of 'image', again a surprising turn given that in *Signs and Meaning* Wollen had gone to great lengths to argue that film was characterised by a trio of sign-types (*SM*, 116). Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, verbal language cannot bear the

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<sup>161</sup> See Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 169, for the same point

<sup>162</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, pp. 169-170

<sup>163</sup> Wollen, 'Field of Language', p. 53

<sup>164</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 169

weight of all the conceptual, coded, symbolic aspects of cinema – as Wollen himself showed elsewhere (for instance in his writings on Hitchcock and *Citizen Kane*), non-verbal aspects of cinema are subject to conventional systems of signification. It is conspicuous how many of the problems present here had been identified in the work of Metz in *Signs and Meaning* – Wollen traps himself in the same binary of signification (spoken language) vs. expression (photographic image) he had criticised in Metz, although unlike Metz, Wollen favours the former.

Wollen also projects onto the word and image binary the Lacanian terminology of Symbolic and Imaginary. Such an idea was hinted at in ‘Photography and Aesthetics’, in which he spoke of the strategies of photomontage or sequenced photographs as opening the possibility for ‘unsuspected changes in the symbolic’.<sup>165</sup> A wariness regarding the Imaginary is seen, of course, in Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, where it relates to the snare of identification. It is also a theme of Metz’s ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, in which the critical or theoretical act is understood to wrench the film-object out of an Imaginary relation with the viewer and place into an analytical, Symbolic one, ‘an attempt to disengage the cinema-object from the imaginary and to win it for the symbolic’.<sup>166</sup> Wollen sees the Symbolic as rather more problematic than Metz does. For though the Symbolic enables the subject to escape its captivity by infantile, pre-Oedipal identification, it is structured according to patriarchy: ‘[t]his symbolic order, this law, is authorized in the name of the father [...] [t]he patriarchal character of this symbolic order necessarily makes it problematic for women and *a fortiori* for feminists’.<sup>167</sup> One

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<sup>165</sup> Wollen, ‘Photography and Aesthetics’, p. 28

<sup>166</sup> Christian Metz, ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen* 16:2 (Summer, 1975), p. 14

<sup>167</sup> Wollen, ‘Field of Language’, p. 53

cannot embrace a Symbolic order that is patriarchal any more than one can advocate a regression to the Imaginary.

For this reason language is accorded a central place in Mulvey and Wollen's films but is simultaneously 'fractured and dislodged',<sup>168</sup> as evinced, for instance, by the halting women's speech in *Penthesilea*, the oblique, poetic words of the 'voice off' in *Riddles of the Sphinx* and the montage of Bryher, Stein and others in *AMY!*. There must, as well, be a 'dialectic of fit and misfit'<sup>169</sup> between image and word – as we saw, for instance, in the disjuncture between Wollen's speech and the camera's autonomy in part two of *Penthesilea* – in order for there to be a back and forth between Imaginary and Symbolic, playing one against the other in order to avoid the pitfalls of each, 'strain[ing] against the imaginary while interrupting the transition to the symbolic, the guarantee of an identification with patriarchal power', as Rodowick describes it.<sup>170</sup> 'Language is the component of film which both threatens to regulate the spectator', Wollen writes, 'assigned a place within the symbolic order, and also offers the hope of liberation from the closed world of identification and the lure of the image. Language, therefore, is both a friend and a foe, against which we must be on our guard, whose help we need but whose claims we must combat'.<sup>171</sup> He reads his and Mulvey's first three films through this model, as attempts 'to investigate the limits of a validation of the imaginary (the myth of the Amazons, the dyadic mother-child relationship, the exemplary heroine) as a form of resistance to patriarchy and the possibility and implications of transforming the symbolic order to one which is nonpatriarchal'.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Wollen, 'Field of Language', p. 54

<sup>169</sup> Wollen, 'Field of Language', p. 54

<sup>170</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 168

<sup>171</sup> Wollen, 'Field of Language', p. 54

<sup>172</sup> Wollen, 'Field of Language', p. 53

As Rodowick points out, this is a literalisation of Lacan's system.<sup>173</sup> Wollen arrives at it via a series of displacements, from word and image (formal categories) to symbol and icon/index (Peircean, semiotic categories) to Symbolic and Imaginary (Lacanian, psychoanalytic categories). Just as Peirce's symbol and icon/index cannot be plotted onto word and image, so Wollen's Lacanian projection too closely identifies language with the Symbolic order.<sup>174</sup> For Lacan, the symbolic order is not co-extensive with language. On the one hand, the symbolic order exceeds language – it contains non-linguistic elements. On the other hand, language contains Imaginary as well as Symbolic registers. Thus the Imaginary cannot be limited to the image. Wollen himself perceives the latter when he states elsewhere that 'we can perhaps consider more complexly the concept of the imaginary once we get away from the fixation of the imaginary purely on the visible',<sup>175</sup> remarks he seems to have forgotten in 'The Field of Language in Film'.

Although Wollen is clearly locked into an accumulation of binaries arrayed on top of 'image' and (spoken) 'word',<sup>176</sup> one might argue that these furnish productive cinematic strategies. Indeed, Rosler's *The Bowery...* or Burgin's *Lei-feng*, with their tension between word and image, illustrate the interest that works constructed on similar principles may have. However, at its weakest Wollen's theoretical stance leads to an aesthetic command, as Rodowick correctly observes, for there to always be a moment in films at which 'language [...] must "speak" theory in relation to the image that otherwise resists discursive conceptualization'.<sup>177</sup> In other words, speech must appear in order to introduce the conceptual thought necessary both for political

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<sup>173</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 168

<sup>174</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 169

<sup>175</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, Douglas Gomery, Peter Wollen, 'Discussion following Mary Ann Doane, "Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing"', in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, pp. 59-60

<sup>176</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 167

<sup>177</sup> Rodowick, *Crisis*, p. 167

discourse and to escape the Imaginary, even if such speech must be discontinuous so as not to be assimilable to the patriarchal Symbolic.

Yet Wollen provides a better formulation near the end of 'The Field of Language in Film', where he recognises the importance of non-verbal, but still *coded*, elements of film – editing and camera movement, for example. Such codes, Wollen stresses, function as a kind of inscription, writing, a conceptual discourse other than that of speech.<sup>178</sup> Wollen also indicates here the importance of verbal language's appearance on the image-track, as in their films' intertitles, superimposed texts and the map sequence in *AMY!*.<sup>179</sup> Both the semiotic valences of cinema's non-verbal elements and the potential disjuncture between speech and writing break up the earlier reductive binary of linguistic-conceptual discourse on the sound-track vs. pictorial-perceptual discourse on the image-track. Instead, Wollen suggests the interplay and displacements between photographs and other kinds of image, verbal language (which itself has two modalities: spoken and written) and cinematic 'language' (codes of the camera, of editing, and so on). This is much more in keeping with Wollen's ideas elsewhere, where the 'film-text' related to the contradiction and interaction of a multiplicity of codes of which verbal language was only one, though an important one. Wollen's tendency to channel his ideas into pithy binaries belies these more complex formulations, which provide a superior lens through which to view his and Mulvey's films; far from being structured according to a simple opposition between images and sounds, these are characterised by, as I have argued, a multi-faceted construction of conceptual discourse via means exceeding verbal language.

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<sup>178</sup> Wollen, 'Field of Language', pp. 58-60

<sup>179</sup> Wollen, 'Field of Language', p. 58

Individually, each section of this chapter points outwards to other parts of Mulvey and Wollen's output. *Riddles of the Sphinx* seeks to discover a set of cinematic strategies and a story adequate to the theories I discussed in chapter 3. By intertwining its account of feminist avant-garde cinematic production with a history of feminist film theory, Mulvey's 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde' plays out in its very structure the interdependent relationship between the two that we can discern across other writings and statements by Mulvey. Wollen texts such as "'Ontology" and "Materialism" in Film' and 'The Field of Language in Film' show that the cinematic genealogy and program for future filmmaking laid out in 'The Two Avant-Gardes' is grounded in a set of conceptual problems relating to language, indexicality, ontology and narrative. By pointing in that section to the resonances with conceptual art's critique of medium-specific modernism, and with Bürger's setting of 'avant-garde' against 'modernism', I have also tried to slightly reframe the established understanding of Wollen's 'Two Avant-Gardes' positions, noting its relation to debates in art more generally as well as its often remarked upon cinematic specificity. Like the thesis as a whole, the chapter is a kind of montage, with elements that are complementary across the texts but also, at other times, apparent distance and gaps between their concerns. This is in keeping with a Mulvey and Wollen film like *Riddles of the Sphinx*, as I suggested in my notion of 'disjunctive collaboration' earlier in this thesis. Yet these disparate sections are held together, as my chapter title suggests, by a shared problematic of exploring signification and language in and through film.

As I show in my next chapter, some of these interconnections fall away as Mulvey and Wollen's work enters the 1980s. The final chapter steps across a divide, the election of Margaret Thatcher, which suspends the overarching utopian project

that was the framework within which different aspects of Mulvey and Wollen's work came into relation with each other. *AMY!*, Mulvey and Wollen's third film, is their last work to maintain this sense of a complex montage between disparate elements. As I will indicate, their gaze becomes increasingly retrospective, as *AMY!*, Mulvey's essay 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"' and their varied engagements with Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti all mark a turn towards the past. Their last two films, *Crystal Gazing* and *The Bad Sister*, see Mulvey and Wollen increasingly distancing themselves from the radical independent film culture in Britain that had been their central working context in the second half of the 1970s. And with *The Bad Sister*, the demands of their writing seem to even be repudiated by their filmmaking.



## 5. 'They Had Damaged the Map to Dreamland'

### Identification and Interpellation: *AMY!*

The invocation in 'Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde' of 1930s debates in leftist aesthetics forms a bridge to Mulvey and Wollen's 1980 film *AMY!*.<sup>1</sup> *AMY!* juxtaposes and amalgamates two moments in time: the present of the film's making and an event fifty years earlier, the solo England to Australia flight of the female aviator Amy Johnson. Esther Leslie interprets the film's retrospective gaze as, in part, a response to the stifled radical aspirations of 1970s experimental film, in the face of the reaction signalled by the election of Margaret Thatcher in Britain in 1979. With the present blocked, the past loomed into view as territory to be explored.<sup>2</sup> This said, a concern with what Sylvia Harvey calls the 'unfinished business of the 30s' had been visible in Mulvey and Wollen's work for more than a decade, so the return to the past should not be understood *only* as a symptom of defeat.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas *Penthesilea* interrogated a potent and widespread mythical image of heroic, phallic women stretching back to antiquity, *AMY!* investigates the discursive construction of a single modern 'heroine'. It is Mulvey and Wollen's last theory film proper, although Mulvey understood it as a 'summing up', a consolidation of the devices and principles of *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *Penthesilea* rather than an

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<sup>1</sup> *AMY!*, 1980. Colour and black and white, 16mm, 32 minutes. Produced by Laura Mulvey and Modelmark, with financial assistance from Southern Arts, £2000. For the script, see Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'AMY!', *Framework* 14 (Spring, 1981), pp. 37-41. Scene numbers and voiceover quotations are drawn from here

<sup>2</sup> Esther Leslie, introduction to screening of *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 15 May 2016. Leslie draws here on comments by Mulvey in an introduction to *AMY!* and *23<sup>rd</sup> August 2008* at the 8<sup>th</sup> Athens Avant-Garde Film Festival in November 2014, online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKw4UGZVjk&t=4s> (accessed 1 February 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Harvey, 'The "Other Cinema" in Britain: Unfinished Business in Oppositional and Independent Film, 1929-1984', in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986), p. 247

advance.<sup>4</sup> *AMY!* employs two overarching strategies. On the one hand, *staging*, in emblematic scenes, without sync-sound, in which Amy (Mary Maddox) performs various symbolic actions; on the other hand, *documentation*, the bringing together of records and evidence – readings from Amy’s letters and papers, a reproduction of a photo of Johnson’s lover, newspaper headlines from *The Times* from the period of her flight, a kitsch song written about her journey entitled ‘Amy, Wonderful Amy’. Though the film has a narrative arc in which Johnson’s flight is the apex, the segmentation and truncation of narrative elements and the terseness with which key information is provided mean that the audience must to a certain extent piece together Johnson’s story. Via Johnson, *AMY!* enquires into ‘the power of representations to fix the meaning of events’, as a contemporary review in *Spare Rib* put it.<sup>5</sup>

*AMY!* suggests a cinematic, thus much expanded, version of the photomontage that had interested Wollen in his writings on photography in the late 1970s, with its complex concatenation of image, superimposed text, spoken word and music. Indeed, the film is a collage of the three signs of Peirce’s second trichotomy that Wollen expounded – and advocated for filmmakers to take up – in *Signs and Meaning*. The texts and voiceover exemplify Peirce’s *symbol*; the footage of places where important events in Johnson’s life occurred, such as Airport House in Croydon (where Johnson began her flight),<sup>6</sup> emphasises film as *index*; the map in the long flight sequence is an instance of Peirce’s *icon*, specifically its sub-category of the diagram, while – pushing the analogy a little – the staged sequences perhaps

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<sup>4</sup> Nina Danino and Lucy Moy-Thomas, ‘Interview with Laura Mulvey’, *Undercut* 6 (Winter 1982-1983), p. 11

<sup>5</sup> Jane Clarke, ‘Amy!’, *Spare Rib* 97 (August, 1980), p. 45

<sup>6</sup> Mulvey described this in her introduction to *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery, 15 May 2016

instantiate that other sub-category of the icon, what Peirce calls an image, representing Amy via straightforward likeness, recreating her room and having an actor perform her role.<sup>7</sup> Such semiotic multiplicity, however, is no mere formal interest but indicative of Mulvey and Wollen's opening up for analysis the ways in which reality may be signified, to understand the process of how 'Amy becomes a legend that can be consumed', a political question.<sup>8</sup> The narrativisation and symbolisation of Johnson's feat is simultaneously its recuperation into the imaginary systems of representation that constitute patriarchal and bourgeois ideology. Mulvey and Wollen return to this complex to prise it apart, to 'blast open the continuum of history' in Benjaminian fashion.<sup>9</sup>

*AMY!* begins with a newsreel shot of a cheering crowd at Croydon Airport. An intertitle gives the year: 1930. As Leslie notes, the image of the mass event, the crowd as a character, is central to Soviet directors active in the same period, such as Eisenstein and Vertov. The appearance of the film's title against a black background in enormous capital letters, followed by an exclamation mark (fig. 35), suggests the bold typography in the intertitles of Eisenstein and others, exhorting, interrogating and inducing excitement in the viewer.<sup>10</sup> The typeface Mulvey and Wollen employ is suggestive of Cyrillic script. *AMY!* juxtaposes 'the old and the new' as in the title of Eisenstein's 1929 film. Even more than Eisenstein and Vertov, however, *AMY!* calls to mind the Soviet work *Turksib* (Victor Turin, 1929), released shortly before Johnson's flight. A film about the construction of the Turkestan-Siberia railway,

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Speculative Grammar', *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume II: Elements of Logic*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), p. 157 [277]

<sup>8</sup> Clarke, 'Amy!', p. 45

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', trans. Harry Zohn, *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 396

<sup>10</sup> Leslie, introduction to screening of *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery

*Turksib* shares *AMY!*'s obsessions with engineering, transportation and conquering geography through technology and will-power. *Turksib* is both a didactic documentary and an exercise in creative, intellectual montage, juxtaposing intertitles, film footage, maps and a sort of constructivist stop-frame animation sequence (see figs. 36 and 37). Why summon the spirit of this Soviet political cinema by mobilising its aesthetic strategies and favoured themes? More than simply connoting '1930', Mulvey and Wollen imply a comparison between the reaction of the earlier period, Stalinism in the USSR and the rise of fascism elsewhere in Europe, with that of 1980, a move redoubled in *Crystal Gazing* two years later. In the face of this, *Turksib* and Vertov offer a model of revolutionary, utopian, analytical documentary.

Before the title, however, another intertitle appears. 'Who was she?' it asks, presenting the problem pinpointed by the lyrics of an X-Ray Spex song later in the film: 'identity / is the crisis'. *AMY!* is about interpellation, about the assignation of a place within ideology. Her identity will continually recapture her for ideology, whether as 'shopgirl', 'typist', 'lone flier', or 'Wonderful Amy the Aeroplane Girl', even as she tries to resist.<sup>11</sup> After the film's title appears a second time, '1980' flashes up on the screen. It cuts to a discussion at Paddington College, shot on video and re-filmed off a monitor. Female students speak about heroines, while Mulvey's off-screen presence can be heard. The pedagogical atmosphere returns us to the 'teaching discourse' that Pantenburg discerned in *Penthesilea*. But unlike the confidence of Wollen's lecture to camera in the earlier film, essentially a string of declaratives, here Mulvey encourages the students to develop their own ideas by

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<sup>11</sup> As Clarke argues, the film refuses to reduce Johnson to just one of these definitions. Clarke, 'Amy!', p. 45. Similarly, Mulvey states in her introduction to *AMY!* and *23<sup>rd</sup> August 2008* that Wollen referred to the film as a 'collage portrait', emphasising the multiple views on her

questioning them. The students draw attention to the heroine's status not as person but as image. Video is an apposite medium here, connoting a feedback loop, the participation of those filmed in the production of their own image due to the technology's capacity for immediate playback, bringing more people into the artistic or activist process (a practice that had been explored in the preceding decade by community video groups in the UK such as Liberation Films).

Shortly afterwards, the film moves to a crucial sequence, scenes 4-6, which includes two of the emblematic stagings mentioned above. As scene 4 opens, we see a miniature chest of drawers. A hand reaches into one and pulls out flowers; opening another it removes a sheaf of letters. The camera pulls out and pans leftwards, revealing a dressing table with bottles and vials of cosmetics, a mirror, a photo of a man propped against it, and Amy herself, dressed in a stereotypically 'feminine' salmon-coloured dress. In voiceover we hear Amy reading from a letter ending a relationship with her lover.<sup>12</sup> The camera pans and tracks further left, bringing into view a hearth, as Feminist Improving Group fades in on the soundtrack. Amy walks back into shot and, sat in front of the fire, burns the letters and photo. The setting, evidently, is the residual *mise en scène* of the Hollywood melodrama, which is also invoked by the smooth, drifting pan and tracking shot in the style of Sirk or Ophüls. Amy is placed in the position of the melodramatic protagonist, with its associations of female enclosure and entrapment. Ironically, it is through a further high-melodramatic deed that Amy is able to escape: the burning of the letters, an excessive, symbolic act, indicates Amy's rejection of the patriarchal Symbolic order (she incinerates words, language), and of the clichéd role she is expected to play within it – the faithfully waiting, deceived young girl.

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<sup>12</sup> The lover is the same man as in the photo on Amy's desk. See Constance Babington Smith, *Amy Johnson* (London: Collins, 1967), p. 107 and the photo opposite p. 112

This scene is followed by a brief insert of a plane in flight, seen from the ground (the plane is a Moth, the model Johnson flew to Australia in, though this is not indicated in the film).<sup>13</sup> The film cuts to scene 6, which inverts scene 4 in several respects. The camera and Amy are in the same position in front of the hearth as at the end of the earlier shot, yet now Amy is dressed in a stern outfit of brown wool – with trousers – and sits making cocoa. On the soundtrack we hear Johnson’s ‘daily drill’, the day-to-day engineering maintenance required for aviation, drawn from Johnson’s papers.<sup>14</sup> The camera pans and tracks rightwards, moving in the opposite direction to before, taking in the dressing table from the earlier shot, now lacking the mirror and converted into a desk, the cosmetics replaced by ink bottles, the photo of Amy’s lover substituted for an image of a plane, as Amy sits at the desk with a book open, pen in hand, pencil behind her ear. When the voiceover ends, Feminist Improvising Group are heard once more. Again the camera continues to pan to the right, arriving at the chest of drawers that scene 4 began with, though this time the hand reaches in and, instead of drawing out flowers, searches through a collection of bolts and other metal implements. The meaning of the reversal is clear: the role Amy played earlier has been rejected, to be replaced by the seriousness and dedication of the life of an aeroplane engineer and pilot. Yet there is still a trace of gender that Amy cannot escape, in the tiny scale of the chest of drawers and the toy globe visible next to the metal implements (reprising its cameo from *Riddles of the Sphinx*) (fig. 38), which we might read as a gesture to the ‘miniature scale’ Mulvey found to be an important feminist dimension of Wieland’s films in ‘Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde’ (‘FFA’, 129).

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<sup>13</sup> See Mulvey and Wollen, ‘AMY!’, p. 38

<sup>14</sup> See Smith, *Amy Johnson*, pp. 151-152

The sequence's side-by-side placement of the everyday labour of the female aviator with the themes and imagery of the romantic melodrama suggest another film, a kind of source text for *AMY! – Christopher Strong*, directed by Dorothy Arzner and released just three years after Johnson's flight, in 1933. E. Ann Kaplan also makes this connection between the two works, though she states that the character of Cynthia Darrington in *Christopher Strong* was based on Amelia Earhart.<sup>15</sup> In fact, although the novel the film was adapted from had as its central character a female race-car driver, Cynthia seems to have been based, at least in part, on Johnson (the film is set in London, for instance).<sup>16</sup> *AMY!* therefore codedly alludes to the submerged history of women directors in Hollywood, and the archaeology and study of Arzner undertaken by feminist critics like Cook and Johnston in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> The central thread of *Christopher Strong* is the romance between Cynthia (Katharine Hepburn), a female aviator, and Christopher Strong (Colin Clive), a married politician. When Cynthia and Christopher consummate their relationship, Christopher asks Cynthia to give up being a pilot. Thus, as the film progresses, Cynthia's flying is written out of the film in favour of the love plot, only to reappear at the end as a literal vehicle for her suicide, as she removes her oxygen mask at extreme altitude. As Kaplan argues, Cynthia's deeds, both as 'aviatrix' and in breaking the convention of monogamy by having an affair with a married man, cannot be assimilated or even countenanced by society, and therefore she must take her own life.<sup>18</sup> While Kaplan argues that the inversion that takes place in *AMY!*

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<sup>15</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, 'Appropriating the Heroine: An Analysis of Mulvey and Wollen's Amy!', *Millennium Film Journal* 12 (Fall, 1982/Winter, 1983), p. 89

<sup>16</sup> Arzner appears to state this in an interview, though she mistakenly gives the name as 'Amy Lowell', seemingly getting mixed up with the poet. Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, 'Interview with Dorothy Arzner', in Claire Johnston (ed.), *The Work of Dorothy Arzner: Towards a Feminist Cinema* (London: BFI, 1975), p. 26

<sup>17</sup> See also Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, 'Dorothy Arzner's "Dance, Girl, Dance"', *The Velvet Light Trap* 10 (Fall, 1973), pp. 26-31

<sup>18</sup> Kaplan, 'Appropriating', p. 90

between scenes 4 and 6 is a ‘reversal of the usual substitution of career for love that psychoanalysis traditionally uncovers’,<sup>19</sup> I would argue that it is not psychoanalysis that is at stake here but the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative. *AMY!* counters the ideology that accompanies the narrative closure of *Christopher Strong*.

A shot of an aircraft in a hangar follows this sequence. Superimposed captions appear: ‘FLYING DREAMS’, ‘FINANCIAL BACKERS’, ‘WAKEFIELD’S OIL’. These function as a bare-bones narrative carrying us from Amy’s initial desire for flight to the actuality of the England to Australia journey itself, which will occupy the next section of the film. As Leslie notes, this ‘process of concretization’, an apparently straightforward route ‘from airy imaginings to economic realities’ is far from innocent. Amy’s is ‘a quest made real by Lord Wakefield’s oil interests. Those oil interests that make the flight possible do not easily give up their underpinning, their enmeshment in colonial oppression, capitalist business practices and military adventures’.<sup>20</sup> Her voyage is funded and fuelled by the empire’s profits and commodities.

Amy’s flight is portrayed in the central, and longest, sequence of the film. In a single rostrum camera shot, the image tracks across a map, following Johnson’s course and coming to a halt at the places she did. Her flight takes place literally against the background of empire, stopping, for instance, in Baghdad (under British mandate in 1930) and Insein (in Burma, then a British colony). Meanwhile, on the soundtrack we hear headlines from *The Times*, interweaving Amy’s exploits with reports of class and decolonisation struggles, the troughs of economies and unemployment, strikes, fascism and ‘Red Terror’. These are presented in a terse style that tell us little about the accompanying lived experience of contestation and

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<sup>19</sup> Kaplan, ‘Appropriating’, p. 91

<sup>20</sup> Leslie, introduction to screening of *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery



brutality.<sup>21</sup> The voiceover's language, though aiming for a veneer of neutrality, reveals the powers of empire and capital it speaks in the name of: in its clipped, upper-class accent it talks of 'mob frenzy', 'mob outrages', 'rioting', while conversely speaking of implicitly reasonable 'British needs'. Where at the beginning we saw a crowd, a collective subject made heroic in the work of Eisenstein, here the 'mob' is the villain – irrational, monstrous. Amy's actions, meanwhile, as they are mediated by the headlines along with all historical events, are individualised – she stands in opposition to the crowd, a lone adventurer. Upon landing, she receives a message from the King – officially lauded by the higher powers of monarchy and patriarchy, she is drawn into imperial geopolitics, the embodiment of British courage and resilience in the face of adversity.

In the film's first half, music drifts in and out by Feminist Improvising Group, a British free improvisation collective with close ties to the world of experimental film in late 1970s London. Sally Potter was a member; Lindsay Cooper, a key figure in the group, provided the soundtrack to *The Gold Diggers* (Potter, 1983) and *Song of the Shirt* (Clayton and Curling, 1979). In a sense, Feminist Improvising Group parallel Johnson, as both break into a male-dominated world of 'skills'. Moreover, in its highlighting of Johnson's daily maintenance work, and in its presentation of a larger political and economic context, the film emphasises the material reality that undergirds the dream of flight. As well as the theorisation of material in Wollen's writings, we can see that the assertion of material reality is a recurring concern of Mulvey and Wollen's films, manifested in *Penthesilea*'s rejection of the phallic fantasy figure of the Amazon in favour of collective feminist organisation, and in *Riddles of the Sphinx*'s emphasis on labour

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<sup>21</sup> Leslie, introduction to screening of *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery

and the role of work outside the home in effecting the psychoanalytic weaning from the dyad.

A cut to the first of two tracking shots circling Airport House takes us into the second half of the film. On the soundtrack, Wollen's voice explains how the thrill felt by the 'philobat' (psychoanalyst Michael Balint's term for the lover of speed, vertigo, risk), the pleasurable rupture that comes with flight, must eventually end, and 'the philobat [...] must come down to earth', at which point they may be filled with 'gloom and resentment at the prospect of dependence'. In the following scene, we still find ourselves outside Airport House, but this time viewing Amy through a telephoto lens, like paparazzi awaiting the arrival of a celebrity. Amy is dressed in aviation gear, flight cap and goggles on her head, carrying flowers and a flask. She walks in the direction of the camera, only noticing it after a few moments, at which points she stops, pinned by the camera's (and audience's) gaze (fig. 39), before continuing to walk forwards, nervously directing her look back to the camera. Then she makes a break for it, trying to escape the camera on her right, but after a few seconds she is pulled back, hooked by the gaze; she turns round and, removing the cap to let her hair fall over her shoulders, walks back so that her face fills the screen, an image offered up to be consumed. The X-Ray Spex song on the soundtrack comments:

ooo ooo they're obsessed  
with yoo ooo  
ooo ooo cos they're watching  
yoo ooo

The film cuts to scene 11, a speeded up shot of a helicopter's descent, doubling scene 5, the image of the Moth in flight. Both are brief, silent inserts separating two of the 'staging' scenes I mentioned earlier; yet where 5 looked up

from the ground, 11 looks down as the ground rushes into view, betokening the philobat crashing down to earth. In the scene that follows, Amy sits directly in front of the camera, looking into it as though in front of a mirror, brushing her hair then thickly applying make-up. Having put on foundation, eye-liner, blusher and lipstick, she takes the lipstick and appears to draw directly on the camera's lens (a shot made using a two-way mirror), producing a face that traces her own, before dramatically drawing a cross through it (figs. 40-41). As we see this, we hear an extract from Johnson's letters to her parents which includes the passage 'I detest the publicity and public life that have been forced upon me [...] I am seeking hard to lose my identity of "Amy Johnson" because that personage has become a nightmare and an abomination to me', before X-Ray Spex return on the audio-track with their song 'Identity'. The film's critique is extremely direct here, though more subtle than initially appears. First, Amy modifies herself to meet the demands of the gaze, approximating a particular image of femininity. Since the sequence condenses mirror and screen, both visually and on the soundtrack (the lyrics ask, 'when you look in the mirror / do you see yourself / do you see yourself / on the TV screen'), the gaze upon her is seemingly both external (it is that of the camera) and yet Amy's own (she sees herself in the mirror). It is an external gaze become internal, hence constitutive of her identity. Amy is reduced to an image, a caricature drawn in make-up that doubles back upon her, as the viewer sees the embodied person through the lipstick cartoon, its features constricting around Amy's own. Second, Amy is also captured by narrative, by the character that is selected for her to perform – 'Amy Johnson' is a 'personage' constructed by the media, one that she objects to playing. She is thrown into another story against her will, her 'great ideas for a career in aviation [...] annulled'. Key elements of 'Visual Pleasure' are replayed here – the

analogy between screen and mirror, the simultaneous operation of spectacle and narrative – though from the position of the protagonist, not the spectator. Amy is entangled in precisely the structures Mulvey had identified in classical Hollywood cinema in her essay, but *in her very lived existence*: she is caught between being a spectacle for a gaze and a clichéd character in a narrative, made safe and possessable. Yet she resists such interpellation, crossing out her image on the screen and defiantly stating on the soundtrack, ‘I’ve lived my own life for the last seven years and I intend to continue doing so’.

In the next sequence, over an image of the Daily Mail office in London, Mulvey’s voice gives the audience another framework for understanding Johnson’s predicament. Where Wollen’s voiceover drew on the object relations school of psychoanalysis, Mulvey’s is a political Lacanianism. ‘The real deeds that a heroine does, strike a symbolic chord, and threaten to open up a break, a wound in the symbolic flesh of family and law, which has to be stitched up again by the creation of images and myths and legends’. In the Daily Mail office, Johnson’s actions are written up as a news story, in the process becoming comprehensible and harmless.

But the following two scenes, 14 and 15, derail this process. Murky, pulsating, refilmed Super-8 footage shows the view from the window of a plane. A jungle landscape and landing strip are visible. Then the slowed down image of a bird in flight, also re-filmed (figs. 42-43). On the audio track we hear what Wollen calls the film’s ‘key speech, placed in symbolic contrast to the male voices of newspaper headlines and popular love song’. ‘It is impossible to identify a continuous source for the writing, which is heterogeneous and disharmonic’, he adds.<sup>22</sup> A woman’s voice (Yvonne Rainer) channels Bryher, Amelia Earhart, Gertrude Stein, Lola

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘The Field of Language in Film’, *October* 17 (Summer, 1981), p. 58

Montez and ‘S’, poetically ruminating on flight, engineering and the suppressed history of Katherine Wright (sister of Orville and Wilbur). ‘What did a landscape look like from above?’ she muses. ‘Strips of multi-coloured brocade. Pools turned into solids’. In the air, ‘I felt I was free [...] I felt simply wonderful’. Unlike the language elsewhere in the film, this speech is not evidential (as in the readings from Amy’s letters and papers), nor explanatory (as in the filmmakers’ voiceovers), nor informative (as in the superimpositions), nor ironic commentary (as in the X-Ray Spex lyrics). The section instead functions as a speculative representation of Amy’s experiences in flight, opening the suture described in the Daily Mail sequence, the intensely private stream-of-consciousness resistant to assimilation by patriarchal ideology, the soft, shaky images like intimate, secret memories. It is an irruption into the film – hence it is not incorporated into the structure that governs the rest of it. For although *AMY!* does not evince the severe grid-like construction of *Penthesilea*, nor even the more supple variant found in *Riddles* (which retained *Penthesilea*’s numbered sections and chapter headings), like the latter film *AMY!* exhibits a rough symmetry. On either side of the central ‘fold’ of the map sequence, for instance, there is (moving outwards, as it were) one of the ‘indexical’ scenes that seek traces of Johnson in places she worked at or visited, then two of the ‘symbolic’ scenes with Mary Maddox, the latter separated by a silent insert. The film is bookended by archival footage of the aftermath of Johnson’s flight and the discussion at Paddington College. The film’s repetitions are inflected differently in the second half – X-Ray Spex replaces Feminist Improvising Group, for example, and where the first half frequently used superimpositions to present snippets of information, the second half tends to favour detailed explanatory discourse transmitted by the filmmakers’ voices. (As well as Mulvey and Wollen’s interest in formal structures in

themselves, such symmetry and variation seemingly signifies the flight as a time of elation and elevation, the period before it as preparation, the period afterwards as anti-climax.) Yet scenes 14 and 15 are alone in having no analogue at all in the first half.

The decision to have Rainer provide the voiceover here ties *AMY!* to Rainer's film of the same year, *Journeys from Berlin/1971* (just as I suggested that *Riddles of the Sphinx* was linked with *Lives of Performers*). Mulvey and Wollen's son Chad had a role in Rainer's film as a child psychoanalyst. *Journeys from Berlin/1971* shares *AMY!*'s fascination with psychoanalysis and history, the latter in relation to the Federal Republic of Germany and the Red Army Faction. Rainer's film uses the device of recurring tracking shots across objects arrayed on a mantelpiece (objects that proliferate with each repetition) whose significance we are invited to read, much like the two scenes in Amy's bed-sit. Similarly, *Journeys from Berlin/1971*'s mobile, aerial footage of Stonehenge, over which a woman reads an excerpt from the diary of a teenage girl in the 1950s (perhaps Rainer herself), evokes scenes 14 and 15 of *AMY!*. Key crew members – Larry Sider, Anne Cottringer, Jonathan Collinson – worked on both films, while Mulvey and Wollen are listed in the acknowledgements at the end of Rainer's work.

However, this sequence is followed by what appears to be Johnson's ultimate recuperation: having rejected her designated role, her plane ends up in the Science Museum – preserved, petrified – and she is remembered in a trite, patronising song on the soundtrack. Wollen describes this as Amy's actions being 'rewritten into the form of legend, based once again on male fantasy, within the patriarchal order'. Having refused 'the name-of-the-father and the identity assigned her by the patriarchy', what awaits her instead is the fate of 'transcription into a fetishized

emblem within the museum-morgue of patriarchal legend'.<sup>23</sup> Each time Amy has resisted a particular interpellation she has been re-placed elsewhere: she escaped the cliché of the lovesick girl only in order to find herself defined as a plucky emblem of empire and object of the male gaze; she eluded the latter but was reinscribed in legend and a history of technological progress and great individuals. Yet the film is not quite done. For Mulvey and Wollen step in to reconfigure history. In the penultimate shot (the final shot is simply a hand in front of the static of a TV screen, counting down to the credits on its fingers) we see newsreel footage of Amy on a platform at Croydon Airport, addressing the crowd. On the soundtrack, one of the students from Paddington College says: 'I don't think that to be a heroine you've got to be famous'. Johnson herself seems to say these words into the microphone, undercutting her positioning as a solitary, exceptional woman and instead producing feminist solidarity across fifty years. History is reworked through a disjunctive sound-image montage that couples 1930 and 1980. The bringing together of evidence in the field of cinema is not merely passive arrangement, but a reconstruction actively intervening in history.

Though the film does not undermine Johnson's achievement, the film's ending reiterates its critique of the notion of the heroine, instead validating the everyday, shared struggle of women – much as *Penthesilea* did. Appropriately, it is Clarke's review in *Spare Rib* that captures the film's argument here: '[p]erhaps we shouldn't be looking for positive heroines any more but asking why we want them'.<sup>24</sup> This, in fact, is an echo of Brecht's *Life of Galileo*:

ANDREA (*loudly*)    Unhappy the land that has no heroes!  
[...]

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<sup>23</sup> Wollen, 'Field of Language', p. 58

<sup>24</sup> Clarke, 'Amy!', p. 45

## Reconsidering Visual Pleasure

As indicated in chapter three, the publication of Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' generated an abundance of rebuttals, qualifications and refinements in the years immediately following. More than this, 'Visual Pleasure' was, as Rodowick stated (picking up a term from Michel Foucault), 'transdiscursive': its effect was to 'open problematics and set theoretical agendas that inaugurate whole fields of investigation'.<sup>26</sup> Mulvey's essay presented issues and questions that had not previously been posed, bringing into view new terrain for film theory and feminist criticism to explore, setting the parameters of critical (and artistic) work even where Mulvey was not cited. As a result, by 1981 the theses of 'Visual Pleasure' required reevaluation in light of the very critiques and the changed intellectual landscape it had itself brought into being. However, as I argue below, its attempt to fill in the blind spots of 'Visual Pleasure' and resolve some of its dilemmas and difficulties, notably by complicating the original essay's emphasis on classical cinema's production of its spectators as male, ends up inscribing the binary logic of the earlier essay more deeply, casting gendered spectatorial positions in an increasingly dualistic, deterministic and even normative manner.

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<sup>25</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *The Life of Galileo*, trans. Ralph Manheim and Wolfgang Sauerlander, *Collected Plays, Vol. 5: The Life of Galileo, The Trial of Lucullus, Mother Courage and Her Children*, ed. Ralph Manheim and John Willett (New York: Pantheon, 1972), scene 13, pp. 84-85

<sup>26</sup> D. N. Rodowick, 'Individual Responses', *Camera Obscura* 20-21 (May/September, 1989), p. 274. Foucault speaks of figures such as Marx, Freud and the Church Fathers as "initiators of discursive practices", elaborating that '[t]he distinctive contribution of such authors is that they produced not only their own work, but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts'. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', *Screen* 20:1 (Spring, 1979), p. 24



‘Afterthoughts on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946)’<sup>27</sup> takes as its point of departure two problems in the 1975 essay. The first of these matters came to Mulvey’s attention as a result of, in her words, ‘the persistent question “What about the women in the audience?”’ – an insistent query addressed to her as a consequence of her earlier argument’s repeated references to the male spectator (‘his look’, ‘his screen surrogate’ (VPNC, 12)).<sup>28</sup> What happened when the masculine spectatorial subject position Mulvey argued was constitutive of classical Hollywood cinema was confronted with ‘actually existing’ female members of the audience? Such a question was congruent with a shift taking place in *Screen*, which by the late 1970s/early 1980s was increasingly rejecting the position that the spectator was a mere construct of a film’s textual operations, as in ‘Visual Pleasure’ and other texts published in the journal in the mid-1970s. More autonomy, it was argued, needed to be given to the viewer, understood as existing independently of the text, pre-existing it; with reading now conceptualised as a historically and textually bounded, but always unpredictable, negotiation between spectator and text.<sup>29</sup>

To put the matter more theoretically, the explanation of the spectator’s relation to the film-text in ‘Visual Pleasure’ was, as I showed in a previous chapter, modelled on the relation of the subject to ideology in Althusser’s account: the individual sat in the cinema was interpellated as a spectatorial subject (a masculine one) just as ideology was said to turn individuals into subjects by hailing them. Yet

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<sup>27</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Afterthoughts on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” inspired by *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946)’, *Framework* 15-17 (Summer, 1981), pp. 12-15. Reprinted under the slightly rearranged title given in the text in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 31-40. Citations are from this reprint

<sup>28</sup> Mulvey, ‘Afterthoughts’, p. 31

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Timothy J. [T.J.] Clark, ‘Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of “Olympia” in 1865’, *Screen* 21:1 (Spring, 1980), p. 22. Clark is glossing an essay of two years before, Paul Willemsen, ‘Notes on Subjectivity: On Reading Edward Branigan’s “Subjectivity Under Siege”’, *Screen* 19:1 (Spring, 1978), p. 5

it was not clear in this model how such cinematic interpellation worked when the same individual was interpellated elsewhere, outside of the film, by ideology in general, as female. The key concept here, the psychoanalytic mechanism seemingly mediating between spectator and film, making the interpellation stick, is identification. This was a central but hardly defined term in 'Visual Pleasure'. There was a pressing need, then, as Janet Bergstrom wrote in 1979, to more rigorously investigate the question of female identification in the cinema and any concomitant pleasures it might have.<sup>30</sup>

In 'Afterthoughts', Mulvey notes that identification can fail entirely with the female viewer, who 'may find herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer, with its "masculinisation", that the spell of fascination is broken'.<sup>31</sup> But Mulvey's concern is instead with the female spectator cited by Bergstrom, the one who takes pleasure in film despite the maleness of the gaze, who enjoys the freedom of action supplied through identification, however imperfect, with the hero – a spectator like Mulvey herself, with her cinephile background. Mulvey seeks an explanation for this pleasure that circumvents the solution offered by Raymond Bellour, that women's enjoyment of classical film is primarily masochistic.<sup>32</sup> Like Bergstrom and Gertrud Koch, Mulvey avoids positing the masochism of female spectators as a way out of the theoretical impasse.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> 'Understanding the determinants of the pleasure a woman can take in specific fictional situations is important [...]. It seems probable that this research will begin by attempting to find a more complex view of identification through analyses of specific films'. Janet Bergstrom, 'Enunciation and Sexual Difference (Part 1)', *Camera Obscura* 3-4 (Summer, 1979), pp. 58-59

<sup>31</sup> Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts', p. 31

<sup>32</sup> Raymond Bellour, 'Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis' (interview with Janet Bergstrom), *Camera Obscura* 3-4, p. 97

<sup>33</sup> Janet Bergstrom in Bellour, 'Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis'; Gertrud Koch, 'Why Women Go to the Movies', trans. Marc Silberman, *Jump Cut* 25 (July 1982), online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC27folder/KochonWmSpectship.html> (accessed 22 May 2017)

Instead, Mulvey bases her explanation on the Oedipus complex. While ‘Visual Pleasure’ and her 1973 essay on Allen Jones drew extensively on Freud’s account of the Oedipus and castration complexes in men to map patriarchal fantasies underwriting art and cinema, in ‘Afterthoughts’, for the first time, Freud’s account of the Oedipal trajectory in girls provides the theoretical foundation. In Freud’s narrative, as Mulvey remarks, male and female children go through a parallel ‘masculine’ or ‘phallic’ phase, in which ‘the differences between the sexes are completely eclipsed by their agreements’ and ‘the little girl is a little man’.<sup>34</sup> The female child, however, must overcome this period, through what Freud in another essay calls ‘the momentous process of repression’,<sup>35</sup> in order to arrive at ‘the feminine [role] to which she is biologically destined’.<sup>36</sup> Yet Freud states that this repression is only partial: ‘[r]egressions to the fixations of the pre-Oedipus [i.e. phallic] phases very frequently occur; in the course of some women's lives there is a repeated alternation between periods in which masculinity or femininity gains the upper hand’.<sup>37</sup>

For Mulvey, the oscillation in adult female subjectivity resulting from the girl’s different Oedipal trajectory, the possibility of regression to the phallic phase, defines the experience of the female spectator confronted with classical cinema. ‘Hollywood genre films structured around masculine pleasure, offering an identification with the *active* point of view, allow a woman spectator to rediscover

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<sup>34</sup> Mulvey, ‘Afterthoughts’, p. 32; Sigmund Freud, ‘Femininity’, in ‘New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XXII (1932-1936)*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1964), p. 118

<sup>35</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Analysis Terminable and Interminable’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XXIII (1937-1939): Moses and Monotheism, An Outline of Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*, (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1964), p. 251, quoted in ‘Afterthoughts’, p. 32

<sup>36</sup> Freud, ‘Femininity’, p. 119

<sup>37</sup> Freud, ‘Femininity’, p. 131, quoted in ‘Afterthoughts’, p. 33

that lost aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully repressed bed-rock of feminine neurosis'.<sup>38</sup> The female spectator 'temporarily accepts "masculinisation" in memory of her "active" phase'. But, Mulvey writes, this identification is always problematic, bound to fail, melancholic, as 'the fantasy of masculinisation [is] at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes'.<sup>39</sup> It is fitting, then, that B. Ruby Rich's gloss on the implications of 'Visual Pleasure' for the female spectator invokes the figure of the exile: 'for a woman today, film is a dialectical experience in a way that it never was and never will be for a man under patriarchy. Brecht once described the exile as the ultimate dialectician in that the exile lives the tension of two different cultures. That's precisely the sense in which the woman spectator is an equally inevitable dialectician'.<sup>40</sup> The female spectator, apparently, can never be at home.

Though I will suspend, for the moment, discussing some of the problems in Mulvey's argument, two aspects of 'Afterthoughts' merit mention here. The first is Mulvey's continued, faithful Freudianism. Indeed, this a Freudianism centred on Oedipus in a manner similar to Juliet Mitchell's version of Freud in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* several years earlier. 'Afterthoughts' – whose citations are exclusively from Freud's writings – gives only the merest hint of Lacanian influence, despite the centrality by the late 1970s of Lacan's re-reading of Freud to the work of others in Mulvey's milieu, such as those around the feminist journal *m/f*, founded in 1978, or Stephen Heath's lengthy essay on Lacan and sexual difference, entitled simply 'Difference', published in *Screen* the same year.<sup>41</sup> Curiously, the 1981 text shows less Lacanian influence than 'Visual Pleasure' – which after all

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<sup>38</sup> Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts', p. 34

<sup>39</sup> Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts', p. 40

<sup>40</sup> Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, Judith Mayne, B. Ruby Rich and Anna Marie Taylor, 'Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics', *New German Critique* 13 (Winter, 1978), p. 87

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Heath, 'Difference', *Screen* 19:3 (Autumn, 1978), pp. 51-112

used the mirror stage to model cinematic identification – even though the prevailing intellectual tendency was in the opposite direction. Second, although ‘Afterthoughts’ addresses itself to the problem of identification, and despite the fact that its conceptual infrastructure comes from Freud, it does not draw on the latter’s reflections on identification. Writers such as Bergstrom, Rodowick and Judith Butler have all turned to such works in order to meditate on identification with reference to feminism and/or film theory.<sup>42</sup> The question of the relationship of ‘Afterthoughts’ to the psychoanalytic literature on identification will be posed below.

The other impetus for ‘Afterthoughts’ is what Mulvey calls ‘the “melodrama” issue’. (‘Afterthoughts’ is placed in the ‘Melodrama’ section of *Visual and Other Pleasures*, rather than the ‘Iconoclasm’ section that contains ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’.) As Mary Ann Doane comments (in a passage I quoted in chapter three), the female melodrama provided ‘a privileged site for the analysis of the given terms of female spectatorship’, reversing the terms of classical cinema, which ‘construct[ed] its spectator as the generic “he” of language’.<sup>43</sup> Yet though I have shown in my sections on ‘Visual Pleasure’ and melodrama that there was an intimate relation between these two fields, this link was never explicitly made in Mulvey’s writings of the 1970s – it is in 1981 that this happens for the first time. Although Mulvey speaks in ‘Afterthoughts’ of melodrama raising the question of ‘how the text and its attendant identifications are affected by a *female* character occupying the centre of the narrative arena’, she does not, in fact, give an account

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<sup>42</sup> See Bergstrom, ‘Enunciation and Sexual Difference (Part 1)’, p. 58; D. N. Rodowick, *The Difficulty of Difference: Psychoanalysis, Sexual Difference and Film Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 69-83 and 97-99; and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 73-84

<sup>43</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 3

here of how identification works for melodrama's female spectators.<sup>44</sup> She had already indicated her position on this matter in the 1970s essays on melodrama: the woman in the theatre feels a 'dizzy satisfaction' in recognising herself in the predicament of female characters, as the contradictions of patriarchy are played out on screen ('NSM', 42). Instead, in 'Afterthoughts' Mulvey reads one particular film melodrama, *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946), as an allegory of female spectatorship – similar to her use of Sternberg and Hitchcock in 'Visual Pleasure'.

For Mulvey, the central point of interest in *Duel in the Sun*, set on a Texas ranch in the nineteenth century, is the relationship of the protagonist, Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones), to the two brothers, Jesse (Joseph Cotton) and Lewt McCanles (Gregory Peck). Jesse, who is civilised and Eastern-educated, 'signposts the "correct" path for Pearl, towards learning a passive sexuality, learning to "be a lady", above all sublimation into a concept of the feminine that is socially viable'. Lewt, meanwhile, is juvenile, uncultivated and (psychologically and physically) abusive, but 'offers sexual passion, not based on maturity but on a regressive boy/girl mixture of rivalry and play'. Lewt, Mulvey says, symbolises 'Pearl's masculine side'.<sup>45</sup> Where Jesse carries attributes of the accession to the symbolic order simultaneous with overcoming the Oedipus complex, such as mastery of the word (his association with books) and the law (he is trained as a lawyer), Lewt represents a pre-Oedipal, phallic sphere, disdainful of the laws and conventions of culture, filled with action, horses and guns.<sup>46</sup> On Mulvey's reading, Pearl's dilemma, her vacillating attraction to each of the men, models the female spectator's relation to the male-centric genres of classical cinema: oscillating between a socially

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<sup>44</sup> Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts', p. 31

<sup>45</sup> Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts', p. 38

<sup>46</sup> Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts', p. 38

sanctioned femininity and the infantile pleasures of masculine identification. Pearl and the female spectator are ‘caught between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity’.<sup>47</sup>

Though as in much 1970s film theory there is a mimetic relation posited here between film and viewer, the film does not ‘organise and sustain’ the libidinal economy of the spectator,<sup>48</sup> but rather dramatises this economy on screen. The spectatorial instability that Pearl’s drama enacts is also figured generically. *Duel in the Sun* is a Western in its setting and some of its themes, but a melodrama in its narrative, centred on the emotional quandaries of a woman. The classical Western motif of the contradiction between law as abstract system enshrined in writing, and a primitive law embodied in the gun, dramatised most famously in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), is played out, Mulvey remarks, in terms of a romantic choice for the female lead.<sup>49</sup> By putting a female consciousness at the centre of the most macho of genres, the film is well placed to illustrate Mulvey’s account of the paradox of female spectatorship. Interestingly, something similar to this oscillation has been described elsewhere in my thesis: the back and forth experienced by Pearl and the female spectator is homologous to Wollen’s claim in ‘The Field of Language in Film’ regarding the dangers of both Imaginary (a regressive return to the pre-Oedipal in the spectator) and Symbolic (the incorporation of the spectator into an already designated place in patriarchal ideology), and the consequent need for films to play the two registers against one another. As usual, however, Wollen concentrates on cinematic strategies – writing, codes, images – that allow filmmakers to foster such a spectatorial response, while

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<sup>47</sup> Mulvey, ‘Afterthoughts’, p. 32

<sup>48</sup> The vocabulary here comes from Rodowick’s discussion of ‘Visual Pleasure’ in *Difficulty of Difference*, p. 6. I have changed the tense in the quotation

<sup>49</sup> Mulvey, ‘Afterthoughts’, pp. 36 and 37

Mulvey's concern is directly with the psychological movements of the spectator. Wollen's viewing subject is not gendered; also, the alternation between Imaginary and Symbolic is valorised, something the independent filmmaker should aim to generate. Mulvey, in contrast, is speaking of a dilemma both specific to the female spectator and general in the sense of being an affect produced by the overwhelming majority of classical cinema. This dilemma is not to be valorised since it is always imbued with the sadness of exile. In these respects, we return to the themes of *Penthesilea*, which rejected phallic identification with the Amazon as a regressive step for the women's movement, and especially *Riddles of the Sphinx*, in which the conflict between pre-Oedipal maternal closeness and the patriarchal Symbolic order was acted out in Louise's story.

Although Mulvey does not explicitly say so, her argument is structured around two sets of oppositions: male vs. female spectators on the one hand, and masculine vs. feminine identifications on the other, producing four possible relations:



<b>Spectator</b>	<b>Identification</b>	<b>Description</b>
Male	Masculine	‘Unproblematic’ male spectatorship of classical cinema
Female	Masculine	‘Transvestite’ model of spectatorship described in ‘Afterthoughts’
Female	Feminine	Female spectator’s ‘recognition’ of herself in melodrama
Male	Feminine	Male spectator of melodrama? (Not discussed)

By arguing that the female spectator can make both masculine and feminine identifications, Mulvey starts to detach the two binaries, so that female does not simply equal feminine, and so on. However, she does not follow this through by discerning the final relation implied by her own analysis – the possibility that male spectators too make ‘transvestite’ identifications, when confronted with the female protagonists of melodrama.<sup>50</sup> This would mean that oscillation between masculine and feminine identifications cannot be understood as specific to female spectatorship (though if one accepts Mulvey’s argument that most classical cinema constructs a male gaze, it is more common for female spectators).

When laid out starkly, as in the table above, it is clear that though ‘Afterthoughts’ complicates the monolithic perspective of ‘Visual Pleasure’, it does this by adding another layer of what Rodowick, employing a term from Claire Parnet, labels ‘binary machines’ – conceptual structures organising information into

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<sup>50</sup> For this argument, see Ian Green, ‘Malefunction’, *Screen* 25:4-5 (July-October, 1984), pp. 38-39

pairs of opposing, mutually exclusive categories.<sup>51</sup> Although I have shown that both Mulvey and Wollen repeatedly employ such machines in their writings, it is most troublesome in this account of sexual difference. The categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’, corresponding to two categorically distinct experiences inside and outside the cinema, run the obvious danger of gender essentialism and a deterministic, causal account of its relationship with identification.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, although Mulvey claims that female spectators may trespass between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ positions, this has the paradoxical effect of reaffirming a dualistic logic of gender. Her model, then, is evidence for Butler’s claim that much writing by psychoanalytic feminist critics on identification ‘tends to reinforce precisely the binary, heterosexist framework that carves up genders into masculine and feminine’.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, it is *only* sexual difference that is indicated in ‘Afterthoughts’ as a vector for identification – class, race and sexuality go unmentioned.<sup>54</sup> There is no strategy here of ‘multiply[ing] the categories of difference in order to displace the oppressive hierarchy of a single, over-arching dualism’, as Mandy Merck puts it.<sup>55</sup> That this should be the case in an essay that takes *Duel in the Sun* – a film whose racial politics are highly problematic to say the least – as its case study is exceptionally strange. Pearl’s situation, the way she is torn between the ‘civilisation’ represented by Jesse and the ‘wildness’ of Lewt, is explicitly presented as a racial opposition in herself: one of her parents is white and the other Native American. Furthermore, Mulvey’s reading of *Duel in the Sun*, in its binary fixation, also ignores the fact that

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<sup>51</sup> Rodowick, *Difficulty of Difference*, p. 1

<sup>52</sup> On this difficulty in feminist criticism of the early 1980s, see Diane Waldman, ‘Film Theory and the Gendered Spectator: The Female or the Feminist Reader?’, *Camera Obscura* 18 (September, 1988), p. 86

<sup>53</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 84

<sup>54</sup> Again, for this as a broader problem in feminist film criticism of this era, see Waldman, ‘Film Theory and the Gendered Spectator’, p. 86

<sup>55</sup> Mandy Merck, ‘Difference and its Discontents’, *Screen* 28:1 (Winter, 1987), p. 7

there is a third romantic interest for Pearl, Sam Pierce (Charles Bickford), to whom she is engaged before Lewt kills him.

Similarly problematic is the way that gender is in an implicitly normative relation with identification, as Mulvey's image of the spectator 'restless in [her] transvestite clothes' indicates. In this metaphor, the female spectator is apparently equated with the body, with nature; masculine identification is identified with dress, cultural trappings laid on top. Masculine identification, it seems, is the 'incorrect' position for the female spectator, feminine identification the 'correct' position – the clothing should match the body. In this respect, Mulvey shares Freud's ambivalence on the relation between women and femininity. Freud distinguished 'masculinity' and 'femininity' from the categories of male and female, cautioning not to conflate the two levels.<sup>56</sup> He indicates, too, that a woman is not simply born, but something that a human being becomes through a developmental process fraught with problems.<sup>57</sup> Yet, even in the same essay, Freud is guilty of such conflation – compressing femininity and anatomical femaleness into one in phrases like 'the truly feminine vagina' – and determination – speaking of how women are 'biologically destined' to femininity.<sup>58</sup> This equivocation is carried over into Mulvey's argument, producing a slide back into a normative account of the relation between 'femininity' and femaleness in which the female 'body' of the spectator is only comfortable in the 'clothes' of feminine identification that are tailored to it.

It was not the female Oedipus complex but fantasy that was the dominant psychoanalytic concept drawn on by other film theorists in accounts of cinematic

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<sup>56</sup> Freud, 'Femininity', pp. 114-116

<sup>57</sup> Freud, 'Femininity', pp. 117-118

<sup>58</sup> Freud, 'Femininity', pp. 118 and 119

identification in the early 1980s.<sup>59</sup> These writers, for whom Freud's 1919 essay 'A Child is Being Beaten' is perhaps the central reference point, emphasise the mobility of identification posited in Freud's discussions of fantasy scenarios. Film is understood as a space where varied, even conflicting identifications may be tried on. In Elizabeth Cowie's reading of *Now Voyager*, for instance, the audience simultaneously identifies with both Charlotte Vale (Bette Davis) and Tina (Janis Wilson).<sup>60</sup> Though Cowie does not make this point, her claim draws support from the fact that, according to Freud, contradiction does not exist in the unconscious.<sup>61</sup> identifications do not have to be limited, as in Mulvey's narrative, to a single character, nor do they have to be restricted to characters of the same sex. As Butler suggests, rather than reinforcing a binary logic of gender, such shifting, plural identifications might contest traditional gender norms, as 'multiple and coexisting identifications produce conflicts, convergences, and innovative dissonances within gender configurations which contest the fixity of masculine and feminine placements with respect to the paternal law'.<sup>62</sup>

By the same token, if cinematic identifications rely on fantasy, they are not merely mutable and multiple but always unsteady, never set in stone regardless of the spectator's gender. Not merely so-called 'transvestite' identifications but all cinematic identifications are troublesome. This goes even for the male spectator of classical cinema, persistently conceptualised in the political modernist paradigm as a

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<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Elisabeth Lyon, 'The Cinema of Lol V. Stein', *Camera Obscura* 6 (Fall, 1980), p. 11; D. N. Rodowick, 'The Difficulty of Difference', *Wide Angle* 5:1 (1982), pp. 4-15; Elizabeth Cowie, 'Fantasia', *m/f* 9 (1984), pp. 71-104; Constance Penley, 'Feminism, Film Theory and the Bachelor Machines', *m/f* 10 (1985), pp. 53-54. Rodowick's essay was reworked into his book of the same name

<sup>60</sup> Cowie, 'Fantasia', p. 91

<sup>61</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Unconscious', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916)*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), p. 186. Rodowick makes this observation in *Difficulty of Difference*, p. x

<sup>62</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 85-86

model of (imaginary) psychic plenitude and non-contradiction, as Rodowick points out.<sup>63</sup> Despite Mulvey's notion that male-masculine identification is unproblematic, Steve Neale has noted the difficulties inherent there, as the ideal ego on screen may conjure feelings of castration and inadequacy in the male spectator, finding it impossible to live up to.<sup>64</sup>

However, one should not be led by such arguments to the position that spectatorial identification is entirely open, nor that gender plays no determining role. Rather, identification is 'negotiated' in the interaction of several forces (a position Mulvey would arrive at by the end of the 1980s).<sup>65</sup> Firstly, films allow less identificatory freedom than fantasies *constructed* by subjects themselves.<sup>66</sup> Different films promote or foreclose different identificatory possibilities. Dramas in which there is interplay between numerous important characters, men and women, would seem favourable to identifications moving between male and female figures. In contrast, the adventure films of Hawks tend to have a male protagonist who is significantly more important than any other character, and frequently present only one female character of any consequence, the male lead's romantic interest. A film like *Vertigo*, similarly, works extremely hard in its formal strategies to establish identification only with Scottie. These films, precisely the ones that provide the evidence for Hollywood cinema's powerful devices of interpellation in 'Visual Pleasure', grant rather less room for manoeuvre to the spectator. Secondly, the indeterminacy implied by fantasy is countered by a regime of sexual difference that seeks to enforce heterosexuality and binary categories of male and female, both

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<sup>63</sup> Rodowick, *Difficulty of Difference*, p. 45

<sup>64</sup> Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle', *Screen* 24:6 (November-December, 1983), p. 7

<sup>65</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'British Feminist Film Theory's Female Spectators: Presence and Absence', *Camera Obscura* 20-21, pp. 73-74

<sup>66</sup> Steve Neale, 'Sexual Difference in Cinema – Issues of Fantasy, Narrative and the Look', *Oxford Literary Review* 8:1-2 (1986), p. 124

inside and outside the cinema.<sup>67</sup> In this respect, Mulvey's emphasis on the powerful mechanisms marshalling identification into gendered patterns remains instructive.

### *Crystal Gazing*

In an interview in *Framework* in 1982, Wollen drily describes *Crystal Gazing*, his and Mulvey's fourth film,<sup>68</sup> as a 'way of getting out of the nightmare of independent film'.<sup>69</sup> The Independent Filmmakers' Association would continue to exist for another eight years,<sup>70</sup> but it had become, as Mulvey later described it, 'too much of a campaign group without the intellectual debates', transformed from a forum for argument and the representative body of a broad movement with far-reaching political and aesthetic aims to a narrower organisation advocating for the rights of independent filmmakers.<sup>71</sup> Although *Crystal Gazing*'s budget was their biggest yet, it was a co-production between the BFI Production Board and Channel Four, signalling a move away from the traditional cinema space.<sup>72</sup> Mulvey and Wollen's next and final feature film, *The Bad Sister*, would be shot on video and made for television. *Crystal Gazing* is therefore an elegy for 1970s British independent

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<sup>67</sup> A caution raised by both Neale and Jacqueline Rose, for instance. See Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle', p. 5, and Jacqueline Rose, 'Individual Responses', *Camera Obscura* 20-21, p. 275

<sup>68</sup> *Crystal Gazing*, 1982. Colour, 16mm, 92 minutes. Produced by the BFI in association with Channel Four and Modelmark, £70,000

<sup>69</sup> Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing' (interview with Fizzy Oppe and Don Ranvaud), *Framework* 19 (Summer, 1982), p. 19

<sup>70</sup> Margaret Dickinson, 'Independent Film: A Chronology', in Margaret Dickinson (ed.), *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90* (London: BFI, 1999), p. 89

<sup>71</sup> Laura Mulvey, interview with Christophe Dupin, 31 May 2003, quoted in Christophe Dupin, 'The British Film Institute as a sponsor and producer of non-commercial film: a contextualised analysis of the origins, policy, administration, policy and achievements of the BFI Experimental Film Fund (1952-1965) and Production Board', PhD thesis, Birkbeck, University of London, 2005, p. 198

<sup>72</sup> The £70,000 budget was much larger than *Riddles of the Sphinx*, although this was somewhat counteracted by inflation and the fact that as a result of a 1979 agreement between the BFI Production Board and the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT), more 'commercial' feature films produced by the BFI Production Board, including *Crystal Gazing*, had to pay the standard union rate to crew members. Before this – as on *Riddles of the Sphinx* – the uncommercial nature of Production Board films had made them exempt from the rate. See Dupin 'The British Film Institute as a sponsor and producer of non-commercial film', p. 261, and Mulvey and Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing', pp. 18 and 19

cinema, for the broader radical counterculture of which the former was a part, and for film itself. As Mulvey stated, it is ‘an end of an era movie, which is one of the reasons it’s sad’.<sup>73</sup> Figures from London’s independent film scene haunt the film, appearing in the background – *Screen* editor Mark Nash can be seen queueing for a taxi, while critic Tony Rayns is visible in a takeaway. Meanwhile the recurrence in *Crystal Gazing*’s costumes and settings of the colours cyan, magenta and yellow (figs. 44-46), the dyes of film’s colour process, inscribes a subtle trace of the substance of celluloid into a work that leaves behind some of the materialist concerns of earlier films.

As commentators noticed at the time of the film’s release, *Crystal Gazing* is more narrative-driven than Mulvey and Wollen’s first three films.<sup>74</sup> It tells a single story, centred on the lives of four cultural workers in London in 1982 – Neil (Gavin Richards), a science fiction illustrator; Kim (Lora Logic), a musician; Julian (Jeff Rawle), a postgraduate student; and Vermilion (Mary Maddox), a satellite photograph analyst – with no chapter divisions or palimpsest-like layers of sound, image and text. In comparison to earlier works, the role of language is diminished: written text is limited to quotations at the beginning and end, while the voiceover serves primarily as ironic elucidation of events, rather than for conceptual argument or poetic associations. In a certain sense, the montage of Mulvey and Wollen’s previous films persists, in that *Crystal Gazing* is permeated by quotations, extracts from other films, photographs, paintings, performances and so on. However, this is a ‘soft’ montage in which they are incorporated into a unified fictional world: we see images of earth as Vermilion studies them at home; we see *The Adventures of Prince*

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<sup>73</sup> Danino and Moy-Thomas, ‘Interview with Laura Mulvey’, p. 13

<sup>74</sup> See, for instance, Oppe in Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Crystal Gazing’, p. 17; Chris Auty, ‘Crystal Gazing’, *City Limits* 75 (11 March, 1983), p. 28; Steve Jenkins, ‘Crystal Gazing’, *Monthly Film Bulletin* 49 (October, 1982) p. 223

*Achmed* (Lotte Reiniger, 1926) playing during a magician's performance; we hear Julian read Antonin Artaud's 'Letter to the Chancellors of the European Universities' aloud during his videotaped suicide. Even interpolations into the narrative tend ultimately to be diegeticised. A painting of a futuristic city is the film's first image (appearing first in a crystal ball, then in full screen), but after around 40 seconds a hand reaches into frame and moves the work, which is now revealed as existing in narrative space (figs. 47-48). Similarly, a sequence in which Puss in Boots is performed in a toy theatre is brought into the world of the story by being supplemented with the voice of Julian, who is studying the tale; later, the theatre can be seen propped up beneath his television (figs. 49-50). The filmic components that Mulvey and Wollen's previous work were an overt montage of – images, words, sound – seem to be given narrative representatives, in Neil, Julian and Kim, who work as producers of each.

In *Crystal Gazing*, then, Mulvey and Wollen were 'pushing outward on the more accessible margins of the avant-garde'.<sup>75</sup> This fits a pattern of BFI Production Board films of the early 1980s, as a number of filmmakers previously associated with experimental film made comparatively accessible feature-length works, for instance *The Draughtsman's Contract* (Peter Greenaway, 1981) and *The Gold Diggers* (Sally Potter, 1983). This shift was encouraged by Peter Sainsbury, Head of the Production Board, who from the late 1970s wished to move away from the emphasis on overt left-wing politics and avant-gardism and foster a state-subsidised British arthouse cinema.<sup>76</sup> We can also place *Crystal Gazing* in an international frame, exemplifying a category of films employing plot and character but mixing in

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<sup>75</sup> Danino and Moy-Thomas, 'Interview with Laura Mulvey', p. 12

<sup>76</sup> Dupin, 'The British Film Institute as a sponsor and producer of non-commercial film', pp. 278-281 and 284-285. See also Sue Aspinall, 'The Space for Innovation and Experiment', *Screen* 25:6 (Nov-Dec, 1984), p. 76



avant-garde strategies and political theory, made by artists whose background was in, or who were close to, experimental traditions. This would include VALIE EXPORT's *Invisible Adversaries* and *Die Praxis der Liebe* (*The Practice of Love*, 1984), Akerman's *Les Rendez-Vous d'Anna* (1978), Helke Sander's *Die allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit – Redupers* (*The All-Round Reduced Personality – Redupers*, 1978) and *Der subjektive Faktor* (*The Subjective Factor*, 1981), and Bette Gordon's *Variety* (1983).<sup>77</sup> *Crystal Gazing* comes, as well, not long after the beginning of Godard's 'second wave' period, as he circled back and re-crossed his tracks from earlier years, working again in narrative feature filmmaking with well-known actors.<sup>78</sup>

However, narrative was not new for Mulvey and Wollen. The desire to tell stories had a clear precedent in Louise's story in *Riddles*. Moreover, as Mulvey pointed out, all of their previous works had interrogated narrative: the retellings of the Amazon myth in *Penthesilea*, the mythic and psychoanalytic trajectory of Oedipus in *Riddles*, the transformation of Amy Johnson's life into a heroic legend in *AMY!*.<sup>79</sup> *Crystal Gazing* does not overtly 'lay bare' its analysis in the manner of those films, which as Nina Danino noted in an interview with Mulvey, were 'very much like theses [...] researched, catalogued, sectioned off, headed, prologued'.<sup>80</sup> Yet it is still an *investigation into* narrative as well as an *instance of* it. The tale of Puss in Boots is recapped for the viewer in the toy theatre scene (much as the first part of *Penthesilea* summarised Kleist's play) and subjected to an interpretation

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<sup>77</sup> As with the exemplary figures of the third avant-garde, these are all feminist filmmakers. At the time of the film's release, Wollen spoke of trying to produce something on the lines of filmmakers outside the UK, such as Akerman or Raul Ruiz. Mulvey and Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing', p. 19

<sup>78</sup> The metaphor of re-crossing his tracks comes from Godard, in an interview with Wollen and Don Ranvaud filmed by Jon Jost, released under the title *Godard 1980*

<sup>79</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing', p. 17

<sup>80</sup> Danino and Moy-Thomas, 'Interview with Laura Mulvey', p. 14

influenced by structural narratology and Lacanian psychoanalysis; Neil and Julian contemplate the usefulness of storytelling when they meet in a park. The crucial difference is that *Crystal Gazing*, as already suggested, finds narrative motivation for its moments of reflexivity, placing conceptual discourse into the mouths of characters and setting it in the fictional world. (Even this, however, is not entirely new, as *Riddles of the Sphinx* had recourse to finding plot justification for theoretical digressions, as when *Post-Partum Document* was conveniently introduced into the film through the conceit of Chris being an editor.)

Furthermore, *Crystal Gazing* is far from the ‘narrative transitivity’ Wollen identified in dominant cinema in ‘Godard and Counter Cinema’ (‘GCC’, 80), instead putting into practice some of the narratological ideas from his writings contemporaneous with the film. Though events in the character’s lives are presented chronologically, Mulvey observes that the film has ‘rather the reverse of a proper narrative structure’, since the impetus that moves the narrative along is, ironically, blockage, in the way that Benjamin characterises Brecht’s epic theatre as ‘proceed[ing] by fits and starts’.<sup>81</sup> Neil goes home with Vermilion but encounters her husband; he attempts to go to Mexico but cannot fly because the airline has gone bankrupt; he tries to speak to Vermilion but cannot because the phone lines are crossed.<sup>82</sup> Instead of events causally following another, units are strung together – tragic and comic scenes, an insert of an artwork, musical performances and magic shows.<sup>83</sup> The basis for this strategy can be found in a work like Wollen’s 1981 ‘The

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<sup>81</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘What is Epic Theatre? [Second version]’, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London and New York: Verso, 1998), p. 21

<sup>82</sup> Danino and Moy-Thomas, ‘Interview with Laura Mulvey’, p. 14

<sup>83</sup> The role of Neil draws on Propp’s studies of the hero function, as Mulvey notes. Danino and Moy-Thomas, ‘Interview with Laura Mulvey’, p. 14. The film’s stringing together of narrative units, moreover, suggests the reading in Viktor Shklovsky, ‘The Making of Don Quixote’, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990)

Hermeneutic Code’, which undertook a critical dissection of narrative to provide the ground for a new cinematic articulation of it, to ‘discover different modes of storytelling rather than pursue the utopian and pointless project of dispensing with narrative altogether’.<sup>84</sup> There is an implicit dispute here with Gidal, who had redoubled his anti-narrative stance since Wollen’s ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’ and “‘Ontology” and “Materialism”” had called for the concerns of ontological modernism to engage with the problems of narrative.<sup>85</sup> *Crystal Gazing* works ‘with and against’ narrative, as Esther Leslie puts it.<sup>86</sup> It is utilised but treated sceptically. ‘It’s a real problem not to be caught between a complete refusal of narrative and a complete acceptance of it’, Wollen reflects.<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, like *Riddles*, *Crystal Gazing* is a tableau film. Most scenes are a single shot, and though there is panning and zooming in some of these the camera always remains fixed, giving the film a theatrical feel, as though the viewer is watching a series of scenes on a stage – a feeling reinforced by the recurrence of the stage as a visual motif. The tableau form connects with Brecht, as Wollen pointed out in his 1975 ‘Introduction to *Citizen Kane*’.<sup>88</sup> In his writing on Brecht, Benjamin sees the tableau form as perhaps the key mechanism for producing the *Verfremdungseffekt*, a frozen picture in which social relations are laid out like a living diagram.<sup>89</sup> In this connection, one might think of certain shots in *Crystal*

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<sup>84</sup> Wollen, ‘The Hermeneutic Code’, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), p. 41

<sup>85</sup> Peter Gidal, ‘The Anti-Narrative’, *Screen* 20:2 (Summer, 1979), pp. 73-93

<sup>86</sup> Esther Leslie, introduction to screening of *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery

<sup>87</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Crystal Gazing’, p. 19

<sup>88</sup> Wollen, ‘Introduction to *Citizen Kane*’, *Readings and Writings*, p. 53

<sup>89</sup> Benjamin, ‘What is Epic Theatre? [Second version]’, pp. 18-19. Brecht himself argues that film is not an art of movement but is ‘by nature static and must be treated as a succession of tableaux’. Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke in 20 Banden* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967), XV, p. 283, quoted in Stephen Heath, ‘Lessons from Brecht’, *Screen* 15:2 (Summer, 1974), p. 125

*Gazing*, as when Kim busks in front of a boarded-up shop, crystallising the precarious labour of the cultural worker in a recession.

These self-contained tableaux produce an effect akin to watching a variety show, tapping into the tradition of avant-garde artists such as Brecht, Breton and Eisenstein turning to popular forms like vaudeville and cabaret as a way of escaping conventional bourgeois styles and connecting with a popular audience.<sup>90</sup> Mulvey and Wollen point to the influence on the film of Eisenstein's 'montage of attractions', its fusing of the modernist and the popular.<sup>91</sup> More than Mulvey and Wollen's other works, *Crystal Gazing* is a rapprochement with the popular: post-punk (Lora Logic and Rough Trade), television, science fiction, video games (the latter of which can be heard when Neil goes to the chip shop) are jammed together with Vladimir Propp and Louis Marin, something Wollen describes metonymically as the encounter between '[r]ock 'n' roll and foreign theory'.<sup>92</sup> If Mulvey and Wollen sought to escape the nightmare of independent film, their way out was 'by making contact with other forms of independent culture'.<sup>93</sup>

Though the film retains the modernist references of earlier works, there is an incipient postmodern sensibility, suggested in particular by the appearance of the emergent mixed media form of the music video. In an essay two years later, Wollen argues that music video is exemplary of the postmodernist paradigm that had developed in the 'crossover between: (1) the fine arts/avant-garde tradition, (2) the mass media, (3) vernacular culture (or sub-cultures), (4) the new technologies (mainly electronic) associated with the "communications explosion" and the

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<sup>90</sup> Leslie, introduction to screening of *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery. Mulvey speaks of the interrupted flow of the film as producing a kind of cabaret. Mulvey and Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing', p. 18

<sup>91</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing', pp. 17 and 18

<sup>92</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing', p. 19

<sup>93</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing', p. 19

“information revolution”<sup>94</sup> This intersection is also characteristic of *Crystal Gazing*.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, just as postmodernism breaks down traditional generic distinctions,<sup>96</sup> *Crystal Gazing* mixes dominant, popular, oppositional, subcultural and avant-garde modes. It is not counter-cinema, since the latter was defined by a rejection, a combative inversion, of dominant forms.

*Crystal Gazing*'s turn towards cinematic narrative seems connected to its interest in history and time. One of the film's central concerns is the historical moment of its own making.<sup>97</sup> As well as providing a map of independent culture and radical ideas in London in 1982, particularly around Ladbroke Grove, *Crystal Gazing* records the larger context of the Thatcher government, the left-wing Labour-controlled Greater London Council, unemployment and cuts. The film is a time capsule of the left's 'loss of confidence' at this moment, the 'sense of disorientation, not knowing what was going to happen next, losing the thread of the progressive politics of the 1970s'.<sup>98</sup> The film is also marked by the way it looks back in time to fifty years earlier, as *AMY!* did. *Crystal Gazing* draws its plot outline from Erich Kästner's 1931 novel *Going to the Dogs*,<sup>99</sup> which follows two men and two women in Berlin at the end of the Weimar Republic period. The film retains Kästner's novel's doomed tone, its backdrop of street violence, an ascendant right wing, bankrupt businesses and rising unemployment, though Mulvey and Wollen changed

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<sup>94</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Ways of Thinking about Music Video (and Post-Modernism)', *Critical Quarterly* 28:1-2 (March, 1986), p. 167

<sup>95</sup> Wollen states that '[i]n *Crystal Gazing* we wanted a lot of electronic gadgetry'. Mulvey and Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing', p. 19

<sup>96</sup> Wollen, 'Ways of Thinking...', p. 167

<sup>97</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing', p. 19. This fact is also noted in Joan Copjec, 'Crystal Gazing: Seeing Red', *Millennium Film Journal* (Fall 1983/Winter 1984), p. 31; and introduction to screening of *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 22 July 2017

<sup>99</sup> Erich Kästner, *Going to the Dogs: The Story of a Moralist*, trans. Cyrus Brooks (New York: New York Review Books, 1990). The novel was previously published under the title *Fabian: The Story of a Moralist*

the text in a number of respects. In this way, they draw an analogy between the utopianism of the 1920s giving way to the dark political reality of the 1930s (economic depression, the rise of fascism and impending world war), and the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s, as well as a concomitant shift from avant-garde experiment to more realistic or documentary forms.<sup>100</sup> In this context, Julian's suicide stands in for that of Mayakovsky in 1930, evoking loss on both fronts.

The formalism of previous films can still be observed in *Crystal Gazing*, if in submerged fashion. Mulvey states that 'the grid, the pattern, that underlies it, is not clearly visible. The patterns and repetitions are not emphatically foregrounded and it doesn't reveal its own structure in a strict formalist manner'.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, a subtler variant of earlier works' symmetry and controlled difference can be detected. Like *AMY!*, the film is structured as a palindrome that becomes slightly disarranged in its second half. The story is framed by images of a crystal ball at the beginning and end (figs. 51-52), which are in turn framed by quotations. The plot begins with Neil's scenes with Vermilion, then Kim, then Julian, then again Kim, then finally again Vermilion. Early sequences are echoed later. Near the beginning, Neil goes to the Willow Pattern Club, watches a magic show and meets the magician's assistant, Vermilion. He goes home with her and is confronted by her husband. As Neil and Vermilion's husband talk, the film cuts away to a shot of Vermilion's hands as she plays electronic chess (fig. 53). Finally, it cuts to a scene in the street. Much later, Neil returns to the club. With the camera placed similarly, we see him watch the magician and speak to Vermilion, the two of them sat in the same seats as before,

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<sup>100</sup> Danino and Moy-Thomas, 'Interview with Laura Mulvey', p. 16

<sup>101</sup> Danino and Moy-Thomas, 'Interview with Laura Mulvey', p. 12. Elsewhere the filmmakers speak as follows:

'LM: You should be conscious of the pattern of it.

PW: Yes, but not all that conscious.' Mulvey and Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing', p. 18

although this time Vermilion does not participate in the show. The two return to her apartment and again Neil speaks with Vermilion's husband, before the film cuts to a shot of Vermilion's hands (and briefly Neil's) as she points out places on various maps (fig. 54). Finally, the film moves to a scene taking place in London's streets.<sup>102</sup> The clarity of the film's structure is undermined towards the end, after Neil's death, although the scenes in question invert one another in a further sub-pattern. As Kim sits in a dressing room, Vermilion appears on her television being interviewed, with the camera panning left and right between Kim and screen. A cut takes us to a different television, on which we see Kim's music video. A body walks in front of the television and turns it off, walking back into shot as the camera pans left, eventually revealing Vermilion.

*Crystal Gazing* interrogates cinema just as Mulvey and Wollen's earlier theory films did, though primarily via narrative and *mise en scène* rather than montage and verbal language. The film draws attention to a dialectic characteristic of cinema, whose poles we might variously term reality and fantasy, documentary and fiction, or – taking symbolic figures from the birth of cinema – Lumière and Méliès.<sup>103</sup> On the one hand, there is its bleak picture of London in 1982. On the other, *Crystal Gazing* is populated by magic and the future societies of Alpha painted by Neil. This two-sidedness is summarised in its last words, spoken by Vermilion: 'Dreams. Redundancy.' It is in the film's title, suggestive both of mystical augury and of the technologically-assisted prediction carried out by Vermilion. This dualism was recognised by Wollen at the end of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* in 1969:

Cinema did not only develop technically out of the magic lantern, the daguerreotype, the phenakistoscope and similar devices – its history of

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<sup>102</sup> According to Wollen, the film should be seen as a triptych, with the sequence centred around Julian and Puss in Boots as the second part. Mulvey and Wollen, 'Crystal Gazing', p. 17

<sup>103</sup> Leslie, introduction to screening of *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery

Realism – but also out of strip-cartoons, Wild West shows, automata, pulp novels, barnstorming melodramas, magic – its history of the narrative and the marvellous. Lumière and Méliès are not like Cain and Abel: there is no need for one to eliminate the other. (*SM*, 132)

The Lumière-Méliès dualism also seems to have been, if one can hazard a speculation, playfully inscribed by Wollen (who was more responsible for scriptwriting than Mulvey) into their films via their initials, fitting with his love of Surrealism and Roussel.<sup>104</sup> The central characters of *Riddles of the Sphinx* are Louise and Maxine; the female leads in *Crystal Gazing* are Lora Logic and Mary Maddox; the title of another Mulvey and Wollen feature, never made, was *Lily and Martine*.<sup>105</sup> These, of course, are the same initials as Laura Mulvey. Moreover, as Esther Leslie says, Lumière and Méliès can be connected to the two artists Wollen claims the film is ‘poised between’: Brecht and Breton.<sup>106</sup> On the one hand Brecht’s ‘*plumpes Denken*’ (‘crude thinking’),<sup>107</sup> his deliberately vulgar materialism and groundedness (‘[f]ood is the first thing. Morals follow on’).<sup>108</sup> On the other, Breton’s romantic belief in the power of the marvellous, ‘[b]eloved imagination’<sup>109</sup> and dreams (‘[c]an’t the dream be used in solving the fundamental questions of life?’).<sup>110</sup> Both seem necessary to political art: the inescapability of the actual and the horizon of the possible.

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<sup>104</sup> According to Wollen, ‘Roussel pervades *Crystal Gazing*’. Peter Wollen, ‘Autobiographical Notes’, Peter Wollen artist file, 31 March 1994, British Artists’ Film and Video Study Collection, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London, p. 12

<sup>105</sup> Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, ‘PW and Laura Mulvey: Lily and Martine (unrealized film project, late 1970s, perhaps realized as *Crystal Gazing?*)’, Item 160, Box B, Peter Wollen archive, BFI Special Collections, London

<sup>106</sup> Leslie, introduction to screening of *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery; Mulvey and Wollen, ‘*Crystal Gazing*’, p. 18. Wollen also balances Breton and Brecht in ‘Semiotic Counter-Strategies: Retrospect 1982’, *Readings and Writings*, pp. 208-215

<sup>107</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Brecht’s *Threepenny Novel*’, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 81

<sup>108</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, trans. Ralph Manheim and John Willett, *Collected Plays, Volume 2ii*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), act 2, scene 6, p. 55

<sup>109</sup> André Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)’, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 4

<sup>110</sup> Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)’, p. 12



In a crucial scene in a park, set in the centre of the film and evoking a philosophical dialogue, Julian and Neil discuss such questions. How to turn utopian desires (often expressed in arcane theory or art) into the day-to-day work of political action? How can the former be made accessible, comprehensible to a wider community, becoming politically effective? The dilemma of the radical intellectual is stated but not resolved. Neil argues that the Greater London Labour Group will not understand Julian's 'radical semiotic theory' as practical politics. Julian replies that 'the ruling class doesn't just rule by practical politics. It rules by defining the language as well.' Julian holds fast to the value of theory. Marin, the French writer whose work Julian uses as the basis of his PhD, speaks of Puss in Boots's trickery as demonstrating 'how to change things into words in order to change words into things'<sup>111</sup> – how to abstract from reality, theorise it, in order to change it. Julian's thesis is a study of this, interrogating the power of ideas, representation, language, to work on reality, modify it, even produce it:

The tomcat hero transubstantiates his humble master, the miller's son, into a great magnate by a series of speech acts. "This is my Lord, the Marquis of Carabas." Julian had developed this argument, and given it a further psychoanalytic twist. [...] Puss in Boots was reinterpreted by Julian to reveal the anti-Oedipal threat which lay within its transformation of lies into truth, fiction into fact, and desire into fulfilment.

The risk here, Mulvey notes, is becoming absorbed in ideas, isolated. Julian's *viva*, at the same time as dramatising British academia's hostility and incomprehension in this period to imported theory, can be interpreted as illustrating Julian's inability to make his ideas comprehensible to those without specialist knowledge.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Louis Marin, 'Puss-in Boots: Power of Signs – Signs of Power', *Diacritics* 7:2 (Summer, 1977), p. 63

<sup>112</sup> Danino and Moy-Thomas, 'Interview with Laura Mulvey', p. 12

This tension is a recurring motif in Mulvey and Wollen's work. In a 1974 interview, Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen pose the question of the accessibility and political efficacy of *Penthesilea's* avant-garde textualism:

*The work of reading is very specialised and not at all widely available. In fact, people who at the moment are able to perform the reading work required, are, from the point of view of class politics, rather marginal. [...]*

LM: It would be our bad luck if that were true. The film was made optimistically in the hope that it could make some sort of intervention.

Wollen adds that 'you begin with the problem, and you hope the audience will find it, and enjoy it'.<sup>113</sup> Here, then, they are closer to Julian, willing to risk a limited impact in order to approach the issues without artistic or theoretical compromise. At the same time, however, by placing their writing in relatively popular publications like *Spare Rib* and *7 Days* as well as dense theoretical journals like *Screen*, Mulvey and Wollen sought a wider audience from early on. In one of *Crystal Gazing's* most self-conscious moments, again in the park, Neil articulates to Julian the impetus behind the film's strategy. For Neil, desire and power can be brought together in a story; narrative can make recondite theory understandable. Hence *Crystal Gazing's* move from counter-cinema to a more accessible, narrative form.<sup>114</sup>

Though in certain respects *Crystal Gazing* balances the Lumière and Méliès tendencies, a more negative perspective on the latter shines through, as in the Pontins advert on television just before the news of Neil's death, clearly intended to exemplify escapism from the unpleasantness of daily life.<sup>115</sup> This

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<sup>113</sup> Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons' (interview with Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen), *Screen*, 15:3 (Autumn 1974), p. 132

<sup>114</sup> Danino and Moy-Thomas, 'Interview with Laura Mulvey', p. 12

<sup>115</sup> Danino and Moy-Thomas, 'Interview with Laura Mulvey', p. 14

forgets the positive role that Mulvey and Wollen ascribed to fantasy in earlier writings.<sup>116</sup> It is also intimately connected with *Crystal Gazing*'s anti-utopianism and lack of futurity. Although the theme of time is weaved into the plot – the strike of women workers that plays an important role in the film occurs in a watch factory, for instance – only Vermilion's infrared pictures, instrumental images used to forecast crop yields and therefore profit, are capable of providing an image of what is to come. Paradoxically, given the film's title, other characters cannot predict their future, the voiceover saying of Neil that '[h]e cannot foretell the next sequence of the story'. The most extreme iterations of this are the deaths of Neil and Julian, which seal off their future, ending their narrative. For Mulvey, they are tragic utopians, products of an era of leftist optimism who find their worldview obsolete.<sup>117</sup> The female characters survive but, as Leslie has perceptively noted, only by incorporation into the logic of capitalism (Vermilion) and the spectacle (Kim).<sup>118</sup>

Although the film is prescient in deciphering how intellectual labour and the 'creative industries' would become central to capitalism in the following years,<sup>119</sup> it does not offer any positive vision to think outside the impasse it depicts. *Crystal Gazing* projects an anti-utopianism familiar from classical Marxism, most notably in Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. In an introduction to a screening at the Kitchen in New York in the early 1980s, Wollen gave the film a twofold context: first, *in* the political situation in Britain at the time of its making; second, *against* the tradition of utopian literature in Britain represented by Thomas More's *Utopia* or

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<sup>116</sup> For instance, 'GCC', 88; Mulvey, 'The Hole Truth', p. 37-38

<sup>117</sup> Danino and Moy-Thomas, 'Interview with Laura Mulvey', p. 13

<sup>118</sup> Leslie, introduction to screening of *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery

<sup>119</sup> Leslie, 'introduction to screening of *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* at Whitechapel Gallery

William Morris's *News From Nowhere*.<sup>120</sup> Utopia is punctured and deflated by the present: 'it surprised Neil at first that the cities of Alpha should fall victim to the Thatcher recession', the voiceover wryly observes. As Joan Copjec has observed, *Crystal Gazing* lacks 'a recognition of the performative function of the imaginary' and 'is ultimately impoverished by its inability to push beyond the familiar to the "new"'.<sup>121</sup> Though Neil's paintings and the shot from the Voyager space probe register Wollen's enthusiasm for science fiction (seen in his short stories and later in his film adaptation of one of them, *Friendship's Death*), the film does not develop what Fredric Jameson describes as the genre's 'capacity to provide something like an experimental variation on our own empirical universe',<sup>122</sup> a space in which to think beyond the 'the total system of late monopoly capital'.<sup>123</sup> Without utopia, without a speculative capability, new history is blocked and the film is trapped in the grim present by its own negativity: '[t]hey had damaged the map to dreamland and there was no way home for the blindfolded'.

Ironically, then, *Crystal Gazing* is somewhat guilty of a 'left-wing melancholy' similar to that which Benjamin (in a text first translated in *Screen*) found in the poems of Kästner, the author of *Crystal Gazing*'s source text, a fatalist despair at arm's length from political movements.<sup>124</sup> Neil's death is distant and mediatised; the strike at the watch factory is viewed in long shot. Yet unlike Kästner, Mulvey and Wollen retain faith in activism. The final image of the women's strike at the watch factory, which reappears inside a crystal ball, was

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<sup>120</sup> Copjec, 'Seeing Red', p. 31

<sup>121</sup> Copjec, 'Seeing Red', pp. 34 and 33

<sup>122</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'World-Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative', *Science Fiction Studies* 2:3 (Nov., 1975), p. 223

<sup>123</sup> Jameson, 'World-Reduction in Le Guin', p. 223. Part of the same passage is quoted by Copjec, 'Seeing Red', p. 32

<sup>124</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Left-Wing Melancholy', trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen* 15:2 (Summer, 1974), pp. 28-32

supposed to function as a glimmer of hope, symbolising the continuation of workers' and women's militancy into the future.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, even if it is unable to counteract the pessimistic logic of the film as a whole,<sup>126</sup> the quotation from Lu Hsun that ends *Crystal Gazing* counsels not just against an excess of false hope, but an excess of despair also.

### **Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti**

In the 1978-1979 academic year Wollen was teaching at Columbia University in New York.<sup>127</sup> He and Mulvey decided to spend Christmas visiting Jon Halliday, who was teaching at the Colegio de México, and his partner Francine Winham, a member of the London Women's Film Group and second camera operator on *AMY!* the following year. The four of them drove around Mexico looking at murals of the Mexican Renaissance, the period of artistic creativity in the years following the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. They visited the house that Trotsky had lived in in Coyoacán and, somewhat as an afterthought, visited Frida Kahlo's Blue House. Although Wollen had been aware of Kahlo before visiting Mexico, he had only seen one of her paintings, *Frida and Diego Rivera* (1931), at the 1976 exhibition 'Women Artists: 1550-1950', curated by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin. Mulvey recalls that she probably didn't know who Kahlo was before going to Mexico. The trip strongly marked the two visitors, who conceived the idea of an exhibition in Britain on Mexican post-revolutionary art. Partly due to the impracticality of organising an exhibition of murals Mulvey and Wollen decided to structure it around

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<sup>125</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 22 July 2017

<sup>126</sup> Copjec, 'Seeing Red', p. 32

<sup>127</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Selected CV', 31 March 1994, Peter Wollen artist file, British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London, p. 3

Kahlo and the photographer Tina Modotti. Both artists appeared in a Diego Rivera mural, *The Arsenal* (1923-28), which Mulvey and Wollen had seen in Mexico City.<sup>128</sup> Modotti had been mentioned in Wollen's essay 'Photography and Aesthetics', though in relation to her partner Edward Weston.<sup>129</sup>

The exhibition 'Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti', curated by Mulvey and Wollen in collaboration with Mark Francis, was shown at Whitechapel Gallery in London from 26 March to 2 May 1982, before touring to Berlin, Hamburg, Hannover, Stockholm, New York and Mexico City.<sup>130</sup> As well as co-curating the exhibition and writing the catalogue essay, Mulvey and Wollen produced a film in 1983, *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, while Wollen wrote a part-fictional, part-critical text in 1979 entitled 'Mexico/Women/Art'.<sup>131</sup> In other words, they circled around the topic, interacting with it in multiple ways, individually and together. Why did Kahlo and Modotti, as both artists and historical figures, hold so much resonance for them? How were the earlier artists' lives and work organised and re-deployed by Mulvey and Wollen in relation to their own artistic and critical projects?

In answer to the first question, we can start by noting a desire to redress the marginality of women in the history of modernism. Both Kahlo and Modotti were

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<sup>128</sup> The above information is drawn from Peter Wollen, 'Fridamania', *New Left Review* 22 (July-August, 2003), p. 120; interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 22 July, 2017; and Emma Hedditch, 'London Women's Film Group', BFI Screenonline, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/497253/index.html> (accessed 31 September 2017)

<sup>129</sup> Wollen, 'Photography and Aesthetics', *Screen* 19:4 (Winter, 1978), p. 18n9

<sup>130</sup> Haus am Waldsee, Berlin, 14 May-11 July 1982; Kuntsverein, Hamburg, 29 July-September; Kuntsverein, Hannover, 26 September-7 November; Kulturhuset, Stockholm, 19 November 1982-30 January 1983; Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York, 1 March-16 April, 1983. After this it was shown at the Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City. See *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, exhibition catalogue (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982); Wollen, 'Fridamania', p. 119

<sup>131</sup> Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti', in *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, pp. 7-27, reprinted in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 85-112. My references refer to the original. Wollen's 'Mexico/Women/Art' was originally published as 'Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti', in Emma Tennant (ed.), *Saturday Night Reader*, ed. Emma Tennant (London: W. H. Allen, 1979), pp. 109-117. In order not to refer to two titles of the same name, I refer to the reprint entitled 'Mexico/Women/Art' in *Readings and Writings*, pp. 105-122. Funding for the film came from the Arts Council's art documentaries fund

overshadowed in their lifetime by more famous male partners – Kahlo by Rivera, Modotti by Weston.<sup>132</sup> Both emerged from, or were linked with, avant-garde currents: Kahlo with Surrealism, Modotti with an anti-pictorialist aesthetic stressing medium specificity.<sup>133</sup> ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, which polemically presented a view on the Mexican Renaissance without showing the work of the ‘big three’ muralists (Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros), was therefore a contribution to ‘a process of archaeological excavation, uncovering women artists overlooked and forgotten by male dominated criticism’<sup>134</sup> – a recurring women’s movement art historical practice, like the aforementioned ‘Women Artists: 1550-1950’ or the 1972 Women’s Film event at Edinburgh. Neither Kahlo nor Modotti was well-known at the time, at least in Europe and North America. In fact, Wollen argues that the coincidence of the exhibition and Hayden Herrera’s 1983 biography of Frida Kahlo precipitated ‘Fridamania’, the transformation of Kahlo into a cultural icon and one of the most-reproduced artists in the world.<sup>135</sup> More than simply adding Kahlo and Modotti to a modernist pantheon, however, the exhibition sought to reappraise modernism from a feminist perspective.<sup>136</sup> Following Viktor Shklovsky, Mulvey and Wollen argue that the history of art proceeds by a knight’s move, ‘through the oblique and unexpected rather than the linear and predictable’. The undeveloped potentials and suppressed figures of a given artistic movement are precisely the ones that later generations find it most productive to unlock and reappraise, as they provide the tools with which to counter the forms, perspectives and narratives that have become hegemonic. Ironically, then, it was the marginality

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<sup>132</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 9

<sup>133</sup> For anti-pictorialism, see Wollen’s ‘Photography and Aesthetics’, pp. 10-18

<sup>134</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 9

<sup>135</sup> Wollen, ‘Fridamania’, p. 119

<sup>136</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 9

of Modotti and Kahlo that enabled one to view them, from a later standpoint, as relevant.<sup>137</sup> Their works, with their ‘smallness of scale, both in subject matter and actual physical size’, a trope of women’s art that Mulvey amongst others had drawn attention to, stood in marked contrast to the ‘monumentalism of the muralists’.<sup>138</sup> The intimacy of Kahlo’s paintings acted as a counterpoint to the vast historical tableaux of muralism. Modotti’s turn to documentary and political subject matter threw into relief Weston’s formalism.

Secondly, the geographical marginality of Mexico in relation to the hegemony of North America and Europe also challenged received modernist historiography.<sup>139</sup> The Mexican Renaissance could be seen as one of a series of ‘talismans’, along with the contemporaneous movements of Berlin Dadaism, Surrealism and Soviet post-revolutionary art, in which there was a conjunction between the avant-garde and radical politics, yet it had received comparatively little attention, despite its numerous connections with European trends.<sup>140</sup> The catalogue essay begins with a quotation from Breton that speaks of seeking the ‘point of intersection between the political and artistic lines beyond which we hope that they may unite in a single revolutionary consciousness’.<sup>141</sup> Kahlo and Modotti functioned as ideal exemplars of this milieu – both were Communist Party members, while Kahlo had a relationship with Trotsky.<sup>142</sup> As with Surrealism or Soviet art of the 1920s, one could ‘turn back for encouragement and understanding’. The objective of the exhibition, then, was to

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<sup>137</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 27

<sup>138</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 12. For Mulvey’s reference to the importance of the miniature in women’s art, see ‘FFA’, p. 129

<sup>139</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 7

<sup>140</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 7

<sup>141</sup> Andre Breton, ‘Frida Kahlo de Rivera’, in *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, p. 36, quoted in Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 7

<sup>142</sup> For Modotti’s Communist Party membership, see Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 22; for Kahlo’s and her relationship with Trotsky, see the biography on the page opposite the catalogue essay



provide a space in which to consider ‘what has been achieved and how it was checked and deflected’.<sup>143</sup> ‘There are so many threads in history to pick up’, Wollen reflects in ‘Mexico/Women/Art’.<sup>144</sup> Clearly, this reprises themes of earlier writings, notably ‘Art in Revolution’, evincing the same desire to unearth and reanimate critical modernist currents. At the same time, the view from the so-called periphery provided a counterweight to his earlier researches, since Mexican art gave a more prominent place to the peasantry and introduced the question of indigeneity, minimised and absent respectively in European avant-gardism.

Mulvey and Wollen’s approach to this subject matter is a form of montage. Wollen states that he and Mulvey were opposed to the hagiographic, individualistic implications of single-artist retrospectives.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, juxtaposing Kahlo and Modotti, painting and photography, making visible comparisons and contrasts, was supposed to mutually illuminate the two bodies of work, to ‘spark off a new line of thought or argument (like montage in the cinema, where bringing two images together can produce a third idea in the mind of the spectator)’, as the catalogue essay notes in a passage implicitly citing Eisenstein.<sup>146</sup> The question of the imaging of women was crucial. Kahlo’s art is centred on self-representation – the most commonly recurring image is the painter herself. She almost always looks out at the viewer, an instance of the ‘fourth look’ familiar from Mulvey’s writing on film. Modotti, meanwhile, was literally the object of the camera’s gaze in her youth, in both popular and high art: an actress in Hollywood cinema and then a nude model for Weston.<sup>147</sup> Her trajectory from this to seizing control of the photographic means

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<sup>143</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 7

<sup>144</sup> Wollen, ‘Mexico/Women/Art’, p. 108

<sup>145</sup> Wollen, ‘Fridamania’, p. 119

<sup>146</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 10

<sup>147</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, p. 26

of representation and turning it outward, capturing political meetings or peasant and proletarian bodies at work, encapsulates Mulvey's arguments of the 1970s, the need to oppose the voyeurism of dominant representations with a feminist counter practice. Yet the women's movement slogan 'the personal is political' meant one could not understand the two artists merely as antithetical. Feminism's assertion of 'the *political* nature of women's private individualised oppression' had the effect of 'recast[ing] Kahlo's private world in a new light',<sup>148</sup> as symptom and analysis of social oppression. Conversely, the 'private' determinants Modotti's work became visible, stemming from the contingencies of her personal history and gender.<sup>149</sup> In other words, the dichotomy of Kahlo and Modotti was simultaneously proposed and deconstructed.

The 1982 exhibition 'Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti' is one example. Upon entering the space at Whitechapel Gallery visitors first saw a wall with the names of the artists and biographical information, painted blue in homage to Kahlo's Blue House and with a vase of lilies on a small shelf, evoking Modotti's photograph *Calla Lilies* (1925).<sup>150</sup> The flowers and touches of colour (some internal walls in the gallery were also painted blue) connote a domestic space, subtly undercutting the white cube with its minimalist purity and separation of art from everyday life. Modotti's work occupied the right side of the gallery – the right-hand wall and the near side of the internal walls in relation to it. On the other side were Kahlo's paintings, on the left-hand main wall and the side of the internal walls closest to it.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti', pp. 10 and 13

<sup>149</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, 'Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti', p. 10

<sup>150</sup> An image of this accompanies Mark Francis, 'Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti', *The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2001), p. 81

<sup>151</sup> I have obtained the layout of the exhibition from photos in the folder WAG/PHOT/338/110-153, Frida Kahlo 1982, and the slides catalogued as 'Frida Kahlo/Tina Modotti 26.3.-2.5.1982 Installation Shots I' and 'Frida Kahlo/Tina Modotti 26.3.-2.5.1982 Installation Shots II', all in Whitechapel Gallery Archive, London

In other words, Kahlo and Modotti were not interweaved but displayed in separate areas.<sup>152</sup> There were no texts apart from the introductory biographies and captions for each artwork. Thus, the exhibition presented the works without overtly constructing an argument or narrative, either by a specific arrangement or a framing linguistic discourse, other than that implied by showing the two artists together. Instead, this was a relatively open format that left space for visitors to find connections for themselves.

The film *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* is somewhat different. It shares materials with the exhibition, showing many of the same paintings and photographs, and lifts portions of its voiceover and some of its section headings from the catalogue essay. It isolates the pedagogical, documentary component found in Mulvey and Wollen's first three films, particularly the lecture and slideshow portions of *Penthesilea* and *Riddles of the Sphinx*. Similarly, it focuses the 'meta-filmic' or 'meta-artistic' element of their cinema, their tendency to investigate other artworks, films or narratives and incorporate these into their own films. The rhetorical figure of dualism is central to the film. It alternates between sections composed of found or archival footage and sections presenting artworks by Kahlo and Modotti, against white and black backgrounds respectively. Each section is composed of two sub-sections, one for each artist (with the exception of the first). The ordering within sections switches – Kahlo then Modotti, Modotti then Kahlo. Mulvey speaks of visualising the film as a tapestry when she worked on it.<sup>153</sup> Intertitles introduce different parts, while short texts throughout provide information. Explanatory voiceover guides interpretation of the image-track.

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<sup>152</sup> According to Mulvey, the presentation of artworks in the gallery space was not directed by her and Wollen, but was carried out by Francis in the spirit of her and Wollen's ideas. Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 22 July 2017

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 22 July 2017

*Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* therefore directs the spectator's response more than the exhibition. The first and last images of the film are exemplary in this regard. In the first, we see Kahlo and Modotti as depicted in Rivera's *The Arsenal*, the rest of the mural masked off so that they are surrounded by black, isolated on either side of the screen (fig. 55). The voiceover speaks of '[t]wo choices for women': personal or political. In a technique familiar from Mulvey and Wollen's other films, the ending replays the beginning with variations. The image of *The Arsenal* reappears without masking, so that other parts of the mural are visible (fig. 56 – an image reproduced on the back of the exhibition catalogue also). Modotti and Kahlo are set in a historical context; rather than their separation, the links between them are emphasised. The voiceover repeats its earlier monologue word-for-word, but continues into recapping and making explicit the film's argument, the personal determinants of Modotti's imagery and the political implications of Kahlo's, that is, the entanglement of the two artists.

The film's device of rewinding, reversing the order of the images after each section on Kahlo's paintings or Modotti's photographs, suggests something similar. It allows the viewer to re-view works and follow a section's line of argument, a didactic technique. It suggests the metaphor of going back to the beginning to try another route out, the different artistic and political responses of Kahlo and Modotti to a similar cluster of demands and limitations. It also mimics something one can do in an exhibition, going back to look at paintings one has already seen. In this sense, it exemplifies the way the film finds a middle ground between exhibition and essay: it presents more of an explicit argument than the former, but takes up the same function of presenting images for the spectator's consideration. Artworks are shown without close-ups or camera movement, indicating a reticence to entirely guide the

viewer's eye. Texts are present but sparing; voiceover is not overwhelming. *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* leaves room for the viewer's interpretation and response.

Wollen's earlier 'Mexico/Women/Art', meanwhile, functions as a draft for their engagement with Kahlo and Modotti, articulating many ideas that would reappear later. Constructed as a series of fictional letters labelled '(In)' and '(Out)' between two individuals, its binary, inversion structure echoes the juxtaposition of Modotti and Kahlo. Two subjectivities, two points of view, dialectically argue out ideas back and forth. The transatlantic journeys of the letters – one writer is in America, one in London – evoke travel to and from Mexico. By interweaving fiction with criticism, an intimate discourse (letters to a friend or partner) with an impersonal one (of history and culture), 'Mexico/Women/Art' embodies the blurring of the personal and political I have already drawn attention to. Its frequent, familiar reference to the artists by their first names (a practice repeated in the film) carries the same connotations.

The subject of Kahlo and Modotti, and the larger context of the Mexican Revolution and Mexican Renaissance, functioned synoptically for Mulvey and Wollen, as a site at which a wide range of their concerns could be explored and developed. It stimulated joint and individual work on the written page, in the gallery and the cinema, an expanded montage in which many angles are used on the same material. As such it offers a privileged location for tracing the contours of their thought and their differential use of divergent forms and media.

## *The Bad Sister*

Mulvey and Wollen's final collaborative film, *The Bad Sister*, must be framed in the context of Channel 4, the new UK television channel founded in 1982.<sup>154</sup> Channel 4 was established by the 1980 Broadcasting Act, which contained the widely-quoted directive that it should 'innovate and experiment in the form and content of programmes'.<sup>155</sup> The new channel had an Independent Film and Video Department, led by two figures from UK independent cinema: Commissioning Editor Alan Fountain had been Film Officer for East Midlands Arts and a member of the BFI Production Board;<sup>156</sup> Deputy Commissioning Editor Rod Stoneman had worked at South West Arts, was on the *Screen* editorial board and was Education Officer for SEFT, the organisation that published *Screen*.<sup>157</sup> Fountain claims that he viewed television as 'a site of ideological struggle',<sup>158</sup> while Stoneman spoke of '[c]arrying the unwieldy framework of seventies *Screen* theory into the practice of British broadcasting'.<sup>159</sup> Thus, through Channel 4, some of the 'dissident cultural intelligentsia' (Stoneman's phrase) of the post-68 era were able to occupy a small but significant enclave in the environment of UK broadcasting.<sup>160</sup>

However, the channel appeared at the overlap of two historical waves. As Margaret Dickinson remarks, there was a sharp 'contrast between the political climate in which the new channel was conceived and the reality into which it was

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<sup>154</sup> *The Bad Sister*, 1983. Colour, video, 93 minutes. Produced by the Moving Picture Company in association with Modelmark for Channel 4, tx 23 June, 1983.

<sup>155</sup> Quoted in Rod Stoneman, 'Sins of Commission', *Screen* 33:2 (Summer, 1992), p. 134

<sup>156</sup> A. L. Rees, 'Experimenting on Air: UK Artists' Film on Television', Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton (eds.), *Experimental British Television* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 152; Tony Downmunt, 'On the Occasion of Channel 4's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: An Interview with Alan Fountain, Former Channel 4 Senior Commissioning Editor', *Journal of Media Practice* 8:3 (2007), p. 248

<sup>157</sup> Rees, 'Experimenting on Air', p. 152; Stoneman, 'Sins of Commission', p. 127

<sup>158</sup> Downmunt, 'Interview with Alan Fountain', p. 248

<sup>159</sup> Stoneman, 'Sins of Commission', p. 128

<sup>160</sup> Stoneman, 'Sins of Commission', p. 133

born'.<sup>161</sup> Channel 4's background was in a mix of liberal and radical politics – the need for it was proposed in the 1977 Annan Report, produced under a Labour government, and it was extensively lobbied for by the IFA;<sup>162</sup> it sought to add pluralism to UK broadcasting, to cater to minority audiences, and so on. Yet by the time of its launch it was operating in an already hostile Thatcherite context. For a while, though, Channel 4 functioned as what Mulvey calls a 'safe haven' for left-wing and experimental moving image work.<sup>163</sup> This was especially necessary when, as Dickinson notes, the institutional framework of independent film was being dismantled through 'the abolition of metropolitan counties, the onslaught on the trade unions and cuts in cultural funding and education'.<sup>164</sup>

For Mulvey and Wollen, the opportunity to make something for Channel 4 did not mean a process of 'remediation', whereby 16mm films like *AMY!* and *Crystal Gazing* were translated into a different medium, but engagement with the specificities of a new audiovisual format – video – and 'architecture of reception' – television.<sup>165</sup> Television meant a far bigger audience for *The Bad Sister* than all their previous films combined. Indeed, though this would have been true even if it had been shown in Channel 4's regular slot for experimental and political work (*The Eleventh Hour*), *The Bad Sister* was shown in an earlier, primetime slot, drawing a

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<sup>161</sup> Margaret Dickinson (ed.), *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90* (London: BFI, 1999), p. 74. The same point is made in Stoneman, 'Sins of Commission', p. 133; and Laura Mulvey, 'Film on Four, British Experimental Television Drama and *The Bad Sister*' (interview with Janet McCabe), *Critical Studies in Television* 4:2 (Autumn, 2009), pp. 98-99

<sup>162</sup> See, for example, John Wyver, 'The Debate on TV 4', *Screen* 20:3-4 (Winter, 1979-80), pp. 111-114; and *Screen* 21:4 (Winter, 1980), which contains John Ellis, 'The Independent Film-Makers' Association and the Fourth Channel', pp. 56-57; and documents from the Independent Film-Makers' Association, 'British TV Today' and 'Channel Four and Innovation', pp. 58-66 and 67-79

<sup>163</sup> Mulvey, 'Film on Four', p. 102

<sup>164</sup> Dickinson, *Rogue Reels*, p. 74. As I noted in relation to *Crystal Gazing*, the BFI Production Board was shifting towards a policy of funding a smaller number of relatively high budget films with 'commercial' prospects. The Arts Council, meanwhile, received a 30 percent budget cut in 1985. See Rees, 'Experimenting on Air', p. 155

<sup>165</sup> The terms in quotation marks come from Hannah Andrews, 'On the Grey Box: Broadcasting Experimental Film and Video on Channel 4's *The Eleventh Hour*', *Visual Culture in Britain* 12:2 (2011), p. 203

viewership of around 2 million.<sup>166</sup> According to Wollen, this was ‘a political decision, to go for a more central area rather than a more marginal one’, which entailed ‘necessarily be[ing] involved with narrative and drama in some way’.<sup>167</sup> Hence, *The Bad Sister* is more straightforward in its narration and sparing in its formalist devices even than *Crystal Gazing*, going as far as employing continuity editing and using music to heighten tension and underscore emotion. Video offered the possibility of special effects unavailable in film, which for Mulvey and Wollen suggested the potential to materialise dream and the unconscious on screen.<sup>168</sup> Emma Tennant’s 1978 novel of the same name, with its slippage between fantasy, memory and reality, was amenable to Mulvey and Wollen’s desire to use video to explore mental as well as physical terrain in the context of a story.<sup>169</sup> It also suggested the palimpsests and layers of citations that had characterised Mulvey and Wollen’s earlier films: Tennant’s novel was a rewriting of James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), substituting a female protagonist. Its play with the conventions of the Gothic genre was also important, as Wollen proposes connections to Surrealism (Breton and Artaud admired works like M. G. Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796)) and feminism (women writers such as Ann Radcliffe occupied a central place in Gothic fiction).<sup>170</sup>

Yet Mulvey and Wollen’s aims proved problematic. Television meant a different mode of production, ‘a more professional, less casual way of working’ than they were used to.<sup>171</sup> Though they worked with regular collaborators like director of

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<sup>166</sup> Mulvey, ‘Film on Four’, p. 102. *The Eleventh Hour* drew audiences of up to 500,000 (Andrews, ‘On the Grey Box’, p. 215). *Crystal Gazing* and *AMY!* were both shown in *The Eleventh Hour* slot

<sup>167</sup> Al Razutis and Tony Reif, ‘Wollen on Sex, Narrative and the Thrill’, *Opsis* 1 (Spring, 1984), p. 40

<sup>168</sup> Mulvey, ‘Film on Four’, p. 100. Mulvey and Wollen had initially considered using a blue screen for parts of *AMY!* Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 22 July 2017

<sup>169</sup> Emma Tennant, *The Bad Sister* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1978)

<sup>170</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Scenes of the Crime’ (interview with Wanda Bershen), *Afterimage* 12:7 (February, 1985), p. 14

<sup>171</sup> Mulvey, ‘Film on Four’, p. 100



photography Dianne Tammes and camera assistant Anne Cottringer, the crew was far larger. Tammes had never worked with video before and there were problems lighting *The Bad Sister*. The video effects proved extremely slow and expensive and had to be curtailed.<sup>172</sup> It seems evident that since film as a format, institution and art form was central to Mulvey and Wollen's theory and practice, the turn to television and video moved them away from their strengths. Whereas previous works included, for instance, explorations of the substance of film deriving from an intimacy with the medium, even deliberate citations of earlier experimental films, Mulvey and Wollen had little familiarity with the work of artists who had, since the late 1960s, been investigating the possibilities of video. Nor is there a sense in *The Bad Sister* that television implies a different apparatus to cinema: the screen is much smaller, sound and image are in lower resolution, the audience is not sat in the dark. Mulvey reflects that they were caught in a cinematic aesthetic, filming on location and shooting long takes that did not translate well into the new medium.<sup>173</sup>

*The Bad Sister* finds audiovisual equivalents for the elements of Tennant's novel: Jane's written diary, which comprises the book's main section, becomes an audio tape, while the editor who presents Jane's text becomes a television producer in a studio. In this space for manipulating images and sounds, documents are presented: photos, Super-8, video interviews. This is given narrative motivation – it is evidence relating to a crime. As Wanda Bershen notes in an interview with Wollen, *The Bad Sister* plays with the detective story structure that Wollen, citing Michel Butor, discussed in his writing on Hitchcock, whereby every detective story is in fact two stories: the story of a crime, and the story of a solution, with the

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<sup>172</sup> Interview with Laura Mulvey by the author, 21 August 2017

<sup>173</sup> Mulvey, 'Film on Four', p. 102

second story concluding via the narration of the first.<sup>174</sup> As Bershen goes on to point out, Wollen's description in that essay of how in late films like *Psycho* and *Marnie* Hitchcock increasingly modified his MacGuffins – 'the objects of search and desire' that impel his films<sup>175</sup> – from money or microfiches to psychoanalytic secrets pertaining to the characters is especially pertinent here.<sup>176</sup> *The Bad Sister* is an Oedipal murder mystery, concerned with ascertaining whether and why Jane (Dawn Archibald), the illegitimate daughter of the Scottish laird Dalzell (Hugh Millais), murdered her father and half-sister. And indeed, the way it stakes out the same terrain as Hitchcock, invoking the typical Hitchcock motifs of the double (the two sisters, Dalzell and his fantasy counterpart Aldridge) and the split personality (Jane can't remember where she goes at night), is signalled by a constellation to references to the earlier director. Lucy Fischer notes the *Spellbound* (1945) poster on the wall of Jane's flat and the quotation of *Vertigo* in the repeated shot down the centre of the spiral staircase in Jane's fantasies (figs. 57-58).<sup>177</sup> But there is also the similarity between the ship that Jane escapes on and the one in *Marnie* (figs. 59-60); the parallels between Dalzell/Aldridge's murder and both *Psycho* and *The Birds* (figs. 61-62); the resemblance to *Notorious* (1946) in the scenes of Jane, ill in bed, subtly tortured by her boyfriend and his mother; the numerous characters whose names begin with 'M' – Miranda, Mrs Marten, Meg, Mary/Marie, recalling Hitchcock's Marnie, Melanie, Marion and Madeleine – and the way Jane 'dials M for murder', calling Miranda to tell her to go to the party where she will be killed (fig. 63). Yet *The Bad Sister* does not reconstruct a rational account of these murders; instead, it

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<sup>174</sup> Wollen, 'Scenes of the Crime', p. 14; Wollen, 'Hybrid Plots in *Psycho*', *Readings and Writings*, p. 35

<sup>175</sup> Wollen, 'Hybrid Plots in *Psycho*', p. 38

<sup>176</sup> Wollen, 'Scenes of the Crime', p. 14

<sup>177</sup> Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 202 and 204

drags the viewer into Jane's ever more complex and confusing psychic life. The framing detective story of the television producer, which initially suggests itself as a meta-discourse that will explain the central section, cannot incorporate the excess of Jane's audio diary. This second story cannot convincingly narrate the first because the psychoanalytic material is a surplus. As Wollen jokes: 'here are these literal-minded people who were going to crack the case. And in fact, the case is uncrackable. It's to do with the female trajectory through the Oedipus complex!'<sup>178</sup>

The film's central section is, then, in Wollen's words, a 'hallucinated re-enactment of the Oedipus story': Jane has a fantasy romance with her mother and, together, they kill Jane's father.<sup>179</sup> The Oedipus complex in the film is different from the standard Freudian or Lacanian view not merely because Jane is female (though the overly close relationship between Tony and his mother, in which the father is absent, serves to illustrate the male Oedipal relation as a counter-example) but because she is illegitimate, thus complicating the superimposition of paternity, succession and legality in the Oedipus complex and its Lacanian iteration, the accession to the Symbolic order.<sup>180</sup> Jane's position with respect to patriarchy is uncertain, and it is this that enables her to kill her father – an ambivalent act that can be seen as both revenge for her exclusion from the patriarchal law and an attempt to abolish that law. Jane's relation to her 'bad', legitimate sister is also ambiguous. We are told at the beginning that she has been murdered, and evidently this can be understood as an ambivalent act directed against the embodiment of the 'correct' female position in the Symbolic. Yet the death is represented in Jane's testimony as a vampiric bite on the neck, just as earlier in the film Meg bites Jane's neck to 'give

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<sup>178</sup> Wollen, 'Scenes of the Crime', p. 14

<sup>179</sup> Razutis and Reif, 'Wollen on Sex, Narrative and the Thrill', p. 35; see also Wollen, 'Scenes of the Crime', p. 12

<sup>180</sup> Wollen, 'Scenes of the Crime', p. 12

her the power', and evoking Jane's fantasy of her mother licking blood off her neck (figures 64-66). Wollen proposes these, in fact, as corporeal inductions into a different community. This community is that of the 'wild women', which Wollen claims is a counter to the 'primal horde' that Freud discusses, an originary group of men organised around the strongest and oldest male who monopolised a tribe's women.<sup>181</sup> Similarly, where Lacan's Symbolic revolves around the dead father, it is Jane's mother, discovered at the end of the film – a change from the novel, in which Jane herself is exhumed at the end – who offers a figure around which some of the film's meanings can be reconstructed, a 'counter-law'.<sup>182</sup> The film, then, uses the illegitimate daughter as a position from which to reimagine the Oedipal trajectory. It creates what Jean Fisher calls an 'alternative spatiotemporality',<sup>183</sup> in which the Oedipal co-ordinates are remapped to such an extent that Jane is able to escape at the end rather than defer to the patriarchal law.

In this journey into unconscious mental life, characters take on metaphorical layers of significance and identities 'split and congeal',<sup>184</sup> are condensed and displaced as in Freud's case studies. Meg and Mrs Marten's faces are superimposed; characters appear in symbolic garb in the oneiric masquerade scene, Stephen dressed as a bishop, Mrs Marten as a jester; when Jane looks into a mirror, other characters look back at her. 'I is an other', as Rimbaud says in a phrase quoted by Lacan.<sup>185</sup> In dramatising the Oedipus complex and the Symbolic order, *The Bad Sister* returns to

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<sup>181</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), p. 141

<sup>182</sup> Razutis and Reif, 'Wollen on Sex, Narrative and the Thrill', p. 35

<sup>183</sup> Jean Fisher, 'The Bad Sister', *Artforum* 22:6 (February, 1984), p. 82. *The Bad Sister* does not explore the feminist community implied by the 'wild women', a collectivity of the kind central to *Penthesilea*

<sup>184</sup> Fisher, 'The Bad Sister', p. 82

<sup>185</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis', *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 96

questions broached in *Riddles of the Sphinx*.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, the toy globe that appeared in *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *AMY!* can be seen once again, in a box belonging to the young Jane (fig. 67). In *Riddles of the Sphinx*, a non-patriarchal Symbolic was posited, but not presented. This was done in the context of issues of socialist politics such as work and trade unions, suggesting that such an order could only come into being as a result of material transformations of society. *The Bad Sister* goes further than *Riddles of the Sphinx* in offering images of an alternative Symbolic order, but in doing so without any consideration of other political matters it must have recourse to fantasy, ‘a liberation which can only exist on the level of a dream’.<sup>187</sup> The film seems to attempt to make up for the devaluation of fantasy discerned above in *Crystal Gazing*. Where earlier films such as *Riddles of the Sphinx* worked through psychoanalytic material alongside questions of political action, *Crystal Gazing* and *The Bad Sister* are weakened by the separation of the two fields, each lacking what the other provides: *Crystal Gazing* blocked without utopia and, as Copjec and others note, neglecting the feminist politics of Mulvey and Wollen’s other films;<sup>188</sup> *The Bad Sister* missing the political agency through which its events could be more than symbolism and fantasy.

Tzvetan Todorov’s concept of ‘the fantastic’ offers the mechanism through which *The Bad Sister* presents fantasy. In Todorov’s definition, the fantastic is situated on the dividing line between the uncanny and the marvellous, the former being a series of curious, mysterious or horrifying occurrences ultimately explicable through the normal laws of reality, the latter describing events that can only be understood through recourse to the supernatural or magical. The fantastic is the

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<sup>186</sup> Wollen, ‘Scenes of the Crime’, p. 13

<sup>187</sup> Razutis and Reif, ‘Wollen on Sex, Narrative and the Thrill’, p. 37

<sup>188</sup> Copjec, ‘Seeing Red’, p. 35 and Danino and Moy-Thomas, ‘Interview with Laura Mulvey’, pp. 13-14 and 16

‘hesitation’ between the two, the ‘duration of this uncertainty’ – which may last for an entire fictional narrative – in which it is unclear whether we are dealing with natural or supernatural orders.<sup>189</sup> *The Bad Sister* occupies this space, in particular exploiting what Todorov calls the fantastic’s ‘collapse of the limits between matter and mind’,<sup>190</sup> sliding between real and imaginary, ‘criss-crossing that borderline between the unconscious and the unconscious’,<sup>191</sup> an ambiguity that serves to demonstrate the material force of fantasy and its binding together with the physical world. It is not immediately obvious, for instance, which scenes are Jane’s memories and which are fantasies, since the actors reprise similar roles in each. As the film progresses, the increasingly porous boundary between the real world and Jane’s mental life is indicated visually: while early on Jane’s memories and fantasies are presented in higher colour saturation and shorter takes, there is a visual convergence throughout the film so that by the masquerade sequence near the end it is unclear whether the viewer is supposed to understand what they see as real or imaginary.<sup>192</sup>

The fantastic structure can also be traced in *The Bad Sister*’s spectrum between indexicality (Mulvey and Wollen went to Scotland to film scenes in places from Tennant’s childhood) and the extremities of video effects – unnatural colours, travelling mattes, characters fading out of shots or appearing in mirrors.<sup>193</sup> The ‘filmic’ transfer or imprint of the real world slides into effects developed entirely within the media apparatus. In like manner, Wollen argues that the film’s inhabitation of the formal conventions of mainstream television drama while simultaneously presenting psychoanalytic, theoretical, feminist content creates a

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<sup>189</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 25 and 44

<sup>190</sup> Todorov, *Fantastic*, p. 115

<sup>191</sup> Razutis and Reif, ‘Wollen on Sex, Narrative and the Thrill’, p. 36

<sup>192</sup> Razutis and Reif, ‘Wollen on Sex, Narrative and the Thrill’, pp. 36-37

<sup>193</sup> Aspects of this were suggested to me by Mulvey in my interviews of 22 July and , 21 August 2017

hesitation effect in the viewer, who is aware that the work is somehow not quite within the common order of television, and is thus unsure how to parse it, constantly unsettled by it.<sup>194</sup>

Yet *The Bad Sister*'s use of this dominant televisual regime indicates a divergence between theory and practice. For it was the argument of Wollen's 'The Field of Language in Film' – and, indeed, it was the burden of a large number of Mulvey and Wollen's essays to show – that one could not simply *use* narrative, cinematic language: it had simultaneously to be subverted lest one be drawn into reproducing the meanings that lay dormant in the dominant cinematic grammar. As Al Razutis argues in an interview with Wollen at the time of *The Bad Sister*, earlier Mulvey and Wollen films such as *AMY!* were predicated on this need for an 'exploitation of alienation between sign and object' asserted in 'The Field of Language', which is not the case in *The Bad Sister*.<sup>195</sup> Though, as Wollen argues elsewhere, the fracturing and fusing of personages impedes identification, this is only at the level of plot and character rather than form and narrative structure.<sup>196</sup> Thus, with Mulvey and Wollen's last moving image work, we have arrived at a pointed misfit between theory and practice.

As elsewhere in this thesis, chapter 5 has sought to place films and writings, Mulvey and Wollen, side-by-side in order to see how diverse works mutually illuminate one another. Specific relations have indeed become visible, for instance the way that *AMY!* and 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"' operate within a shared problematic of identification and interpellation, or the way that Wollen's analyses of narrative in the early 1980s inform *Crystal Gazing* and

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<sup>194</sup> Razutis and Reif, 'Wollen on Sex, Narrative and the Thrill', p. 36

<sup>195</sup> Razutis and Reif, 'Wollen on Sex, Narrative and the Thrill', p. 36

<sup>196</sup> Wollen, 'Scenes of the Crime', pp. 13-14

*The Bad Sister*. Mulvey and Wollen's engagement with the work of Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti, meanwhile, is emblematic of their strategy of using the diverse potentials of different practices: collaboration and individual work; fiction and non-fiction; filmmaking, curating and writing. As I have suggested, this can be understood as a kind of montage, underscoring the centrality of this cinematic device to their work as a whole.

Throughout my thesis I have tried to emphasise that the relationship between Mulvey and Wollen's films and writings is a dynamic one: the films do not merely illustrate theories, nor do their writings merely codify and justify the strategies of their films. A constructive relationship between the two does not imply a static harmony, but a back and forth in which there is space for implicit critique as well as complementarity. However, in the works I have brought together in this chapter, we can see the gap between theory and practice widen to a degree that creates unacknowledged contradictions and unresolved dissonances, such as the negative perspective on fantasy that colours *Crystal Gazing*, or the uncritical deployment of narrative in *The Bad Sister*. The turn away from the theory film after *AMY!* is symptomatic here, since this mode of filmmaking mediated theory and practice. Their works become increasingly atomised; although cross-connections between individual films and texts can be charted, what is missing is the utopian horizon that brought the variegated aspects of their output under the rubric of a radical counter-cinema, a rubric that entailed practice and theory continually questioning one another. Without this, both films and writings are weakened.



## **Conclusion – On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time**

Mulvey states that by 1984 '[t]he Women's Movement no longer existed as an organisation, in spite of the widespread influence of feminism',<sup>1</sup> echoing Beatrix Campbell and Anna Coote's remarks that the 'particular phase of the women's movement [...] which called itself the women's liberation movement' had ended.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, 1983 and 1984 brought the re-elections of Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, signalling the protraction and intensification of social, political, economic and cultural changes begun at the turn of the decade. The 1984 defeat of the miner's strike indicated the retreat of militant trade unions as a major political force in Britain, an event noted by both Mulvey and Peter Osborne as marking the end of the historical field that had sustained 1970s radical film.<sup>3</sup> The Thatcher government – the British political expression of a larger neoliberal turn – brought cuts to public services and welfare (which artists and writers could previously live on and utilise); privatisation of social housing and accelerated gentrification in London,<sup>4</sup> in part via 'redevelopment' projects (again, cheap rents and squatting had sustained independent culture – the LFMC had occupied various buildings on short-term leases, for instance);<sup>5</sup> and cuts to arts funding and a new policy in cultural institutions biased against small scale, less commercial work. Writing in *Afterimage* in 1985, Simon Field spoke of the 'significant changes in the circumstances of

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<sup>1</sup> Mulvey, 'Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience', *Visual and Other Pleasures*, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 165

<sup>2</sup> Beatrix Campbell and Anna Coote, *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. vii

<sup>3</sup> Mulvey, 'Changes', pp. 166-167; Peter Osborne in conversation with Paul Willemsen, in Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner (eds.), *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s* (Southend-on-Sea: Focal Point Gallery, 2013), p. 41

<sup>4</sup> See David Harvey, 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review* 53 (September-October, 2008), p. 36

<sup>5</sup> For the passage of one 1970s alternative art space to 1980s corporate redevelopment, see *After Butler's Wharf: Essays on a Working Building* (London: Royal College of Art, 2013)

independent film-making', such as 'the much bruited realities (and fantasies) pertaining to Channel 4', part of 'a complex jigsaw' that also included 'changing degrees and priorities of financial aid, about to receive another crippling blow of as yet unknown proportion with the abolition of the GLC [Greater London Council] and metropolitan councils'.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, Mulvey and Wollen's projected film *Chess Fever* – a narrative work alluding to a 1925 Soviet film of the same name (directed by Pudovkin and Nikolai Shpikovsky) and, presumably, to Duchamp's fascination with chess – would remain unmade.<sup>7</sup> Around this time, as well, Mulvey and Wollen separated. Wollen went on to direct a single film on his own, *Friendship's Death* (1987), based on his own short story, which he classified as a BFI B-movie,<sup>8</sup> exemplifying what he elsewhere called the 'Last New Wave', a British alternative art cinema of the 1980s hinted at in *Crystal Gazing*.<sup>9</sup> Mulvey would maintain an interest in collaboration, making *Disgraced Monuments* (1994) with Mark Lewis, itself a film about the end of an era, that of actually existing socialism.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the para-academic counter public sphere in which her writing had appeared until the early 1980s, Mulvey's later writing increasingly situates itself within academia, culminating in *Death 24x a Second*, which returns to and reconceptualises spectatorship and fetishism, themes central to her early writing.<sup>11</sup> Over the same period, Wollen

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<sup>6</sup> Simon Field, 'Editorial', *Afterimage* 12 (1985), p. 4

<sup>7</sup> An outline for this work was written in 1984. Two unmade film projects of the late 1970s, *Lily and Martine* and *Possible Worlds*, were partly incorporated into *Crystal Gazing*

<sup>8</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Two Weeks on Another Planet' (interview with Simon Field), *Monthly Film Bulletin* 646 (November, 1987), p. 326

<sup>9</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Last New Wave', in *Paris/Hollywood: Writings on Film* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), pp. 164-182

<sup>10</sup> More recently, Mulvey made *23<sup>rd</sup> August 2008* (2013), with Mark Lewis and Faysal Abdullah

<sup>11</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006)

developed as an elegant essayist, turning to contemporary art as well as cinema.<sup>12</sup> Although Wollen always shared with *New Left Review* editor Perry Anderson a penchant and competency for the satellite view of historical or theoretical terrain, rather than close analysis, these later essays lack the embeddedness of the writings considered in this thesis – they are distanced, less is personally at stake in them. The faithful yet resigned leftism in the concluding remarks of Wollen’s 1993 essay on Karl Kautsky – ‘[s]ocialists should accept that it may be better to have a realistic hope, however historically distant, than a false hope based on a deformed foreshortening, however immediate and close at hand it seems to be’<sup>13</sup> – indicates the distance travelled from the disorientation of *Crystal Gazing* in 1982, let alone the revolutionary eschatology in works of the early 1970s like ‘Art in Revolution’, ‘Godard and Counter Cinema’ and ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’. Both Mulvey and Wollen have frequently returned in later writings to reflect on this earlier period, a mark of its determinant status.<sup>14</sup>

In chapter three, I drew attention to Annette Michelson’s detailing, in 1966’s ‘Film and the Radical Aspiration’, of the early twentieth-century attempt, emblematised most of all by the Soviet avant-garde, to bring together political and artistic radicalism in a grand utopian project.<sup>15</sup> The long 1970s (from May ’68 to the 1984 miners’ strike) that this thesis has spanned can be understood as defined by this

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<sup>12</sup> Some of these are collected in *Paris/Hollywood* and *Paris/Manhattan: Writings on Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2004)

<sup>13</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘Our Post-Communism: The Legacy of Karl Kautsky’, *New Left Review* I/202 (November-December, 1993), p. 93

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Peter Wollen, ‘Thirteen Paragraphs’, in Judith Mastai (ed.), *Social Process/Collaborative Action: Mary Kelly 1970-1975* (Vancouver: Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, 1997), pp. 25-31; ‘Perhaps...’, *October* 88 (Spring, 1999), pp. 42-45; ‘Knight’s Moves’, *Public* 25 (Spring, 2002), pp. 54-67. For Mulvey, see, for instance, ‘Hollywood Cinema and Feminist Theory: A Strange but Persistent Relationship’, *Iris* 26 (1998), pp. 23-32; ‘Looking at the Past from the Present: Rethinking Feminist Film Theory of the 1970s’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30:1 (Autumn, 2004), pp. 1287-1292

<sup>15</sup> Annette Michelson, ‘Film and the Radical Aspiration’, in P. Adams Sitney, *Film Culture: An Anthology* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1971), pp. 407 and 409-410, originally in *Film Culture* 42 (Fall, 1966)

aspiration's re-opening and then contraction again. However, in her 1987 essay 'Changes', in which she deliberates on and summarises the earlier epoch, no longer in the present tense but 'shifted into the past', Mulvey states that this 'sense of *historical* closure recalled the distrust of *narrative* closure that had always been a point of principle for the feminist avant-garde'.<sup>16</sup> Such closure places political struggle safely in the past, to be viewed at a distance from the stable, settled present, rather than keeping historical contradictions open. The task, then, is de-coupling ending from closure, recognising the historically specific circumstances that allowed for certain cultural and intellectual production and political movements while neither having a nostalgic relation to this period nor historicising it out of existence. The past is an ongoing project, the meaning and implications of which are not fixed. In similar vein, Wollen opens an essay on the Situationist International – written in 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and signed by Wollen from Los Angeles, 'Capital of the Spectacle' – by placing it in a longer history of revolutionary upsurges in art and politics: 'De Sade liberated from the Bastille in 1789, Baudelaire on the barricades in 1848, Courbet tearing down the Vendôme Column in 1870'.<sup>17</sup> Concluding, Wollen contemplates how '[a]vant-gardes have their day and then, "after them operations are undertaken in a much vaster theatre". [...] We need not persist in seeking a unique condition for revolution, but neither need we forget the desire for liberation. We move from place to place and from time

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<sup>16</sup> Mulvey, 'Changes', p. 165

<sup>17</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Situationist International', *New Left Review* 1/174 (March-April 1989), p. 67. This was also the catalogue essay for 'On the Passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: The Situationist International, 1957-1972', a 1989 exhibition organised by Wollen and Mark Francis, shown at Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris (February 21, 1989-April 9, 1989); Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (June 23, 1989-August 13, 1989); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (October 20, 1989-January 7, 1990). It is reprinted in Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 120-157

to time. This is true of art as well as politics'.<sup>18</sup> History is a *derive* – we do not know where we are going.

I wish to hold onto these two perspectives while introducing a third. In conversation, appropriately, with a figure (Paul Willemen) most famous for his association with this radical film culture of the 1970s and early 1980s, Peter Osborne not only remarks that the texts this culture produced 'stand up incredibly well in relation to subsequent production, which looks like a lot of bad secondary literature', but suggests what it might mean to read them. 'To think about the 1970s from the standpoint of the present', Osborne asserts, is not to 'narrate the transformation' that links then and now, but to 'try and think the relation between these points' across a historical chasm. On this account (which is, like Mulvey and Wollen's arguments above, an avant-gardist reading of history), '[f]ilm becomes the model for the methodology of the philosophy of history', since there is a dialectical montage with history itself: out of contrast something new is formed, hence Osborne's demand to intensify the difference between then and now.<sup>19</sup> My thesis, then, has attempted to provide some of the materials for this project by excavating and reconstructing Mulvey and Wollen's films and writings. Unlike Eisenstein's rather rigid conception of dialectical montage, no correct image or thought follows in itself from this juxtaposition of two periods. We cannot know in advance what will come from their encounter.

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<sup>18</sup> Wollen, 'The Situationist International', p. 95

<sup>19</sup> Peter Osborne in conversation with Paul Willemen, in Bauer and Kidner (eds.), *Working Together*, p. 41

## Appendix – Figures



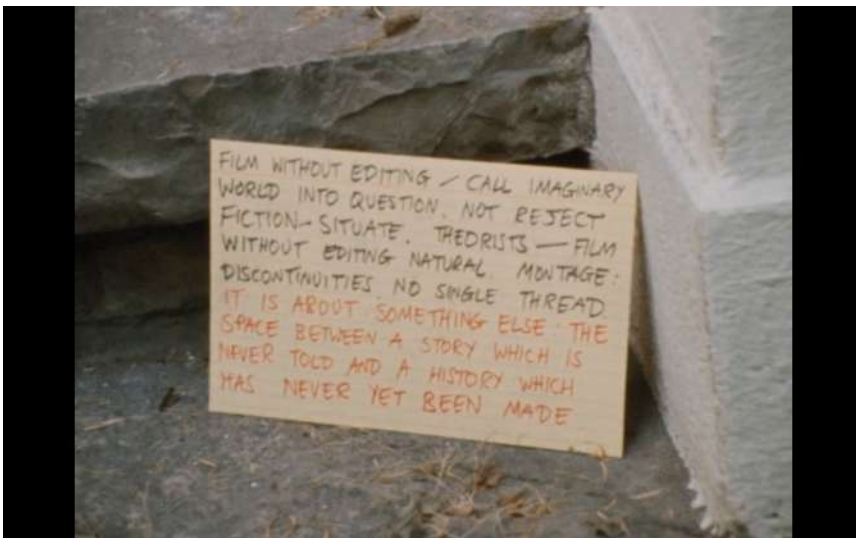
1. *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons*



2. *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons*



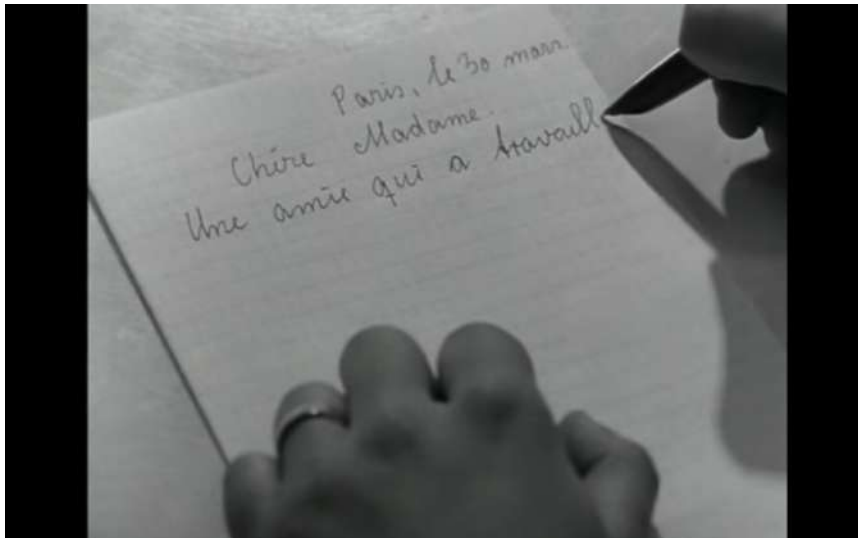
3. *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons*



4. *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons*



5. *Luttes en Italie* (Dziga Vertov Group, 1969)



6. *Vivre sa vie* (Godard, 1962)



7. *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons*



8. *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons*





9. *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons*



10. *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons*



11. *October* (Eisenstein, 1927)



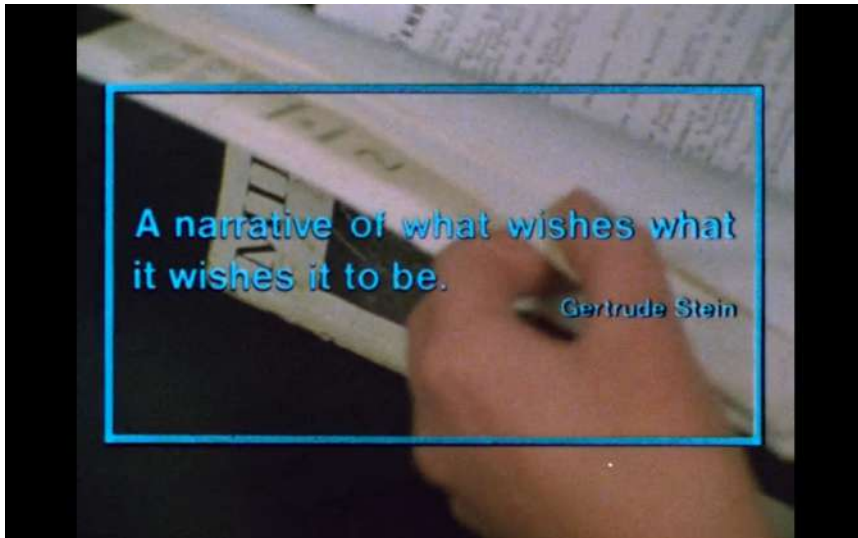
12. *October*



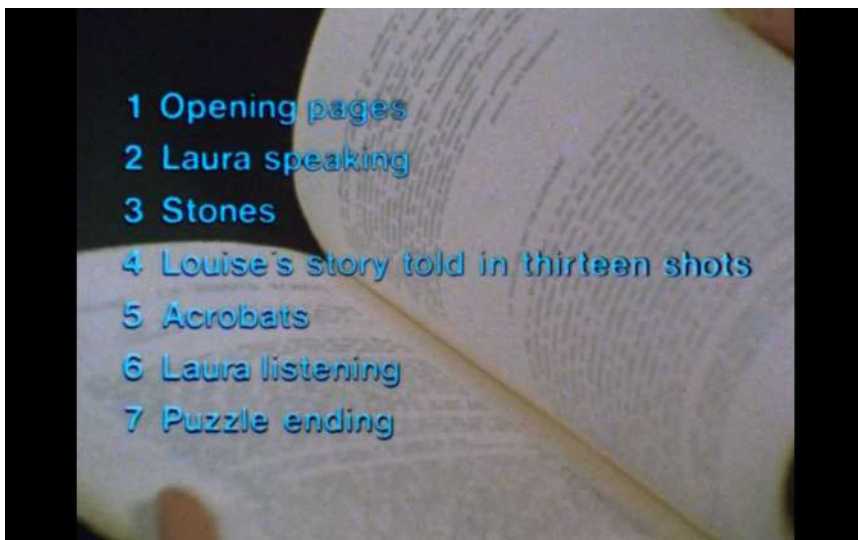
13. *October*



14. *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons*



15. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



16. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



17. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



18. *Riddles of the Sphinx*

Perhaps Louise is too close to her child. How much longer can she reject the outside world, other people and other demands? Her husband often

19. *Riddles of the Sphinx*

bedtime, she likes to stay in Anna's room, waiting for her to fall asleep and tidying away the traces of the day. She still seems to need the

20. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



cannot make her see reason  
and get out more into the  
world, Chris feels he must  
leave the house himself.  
It was her idea to live in

21. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



22. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



23. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



24. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



25. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



26. *Imitation of Life* (Sirk, 1959)



27. *Written on the Wind* (Sirk, 1956)



28. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



29. *Riddles of the Sphinx*





30. *Written on the Wind*



31. *Written on the Wind*



32. *Riddles of the Sphinx*





33. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



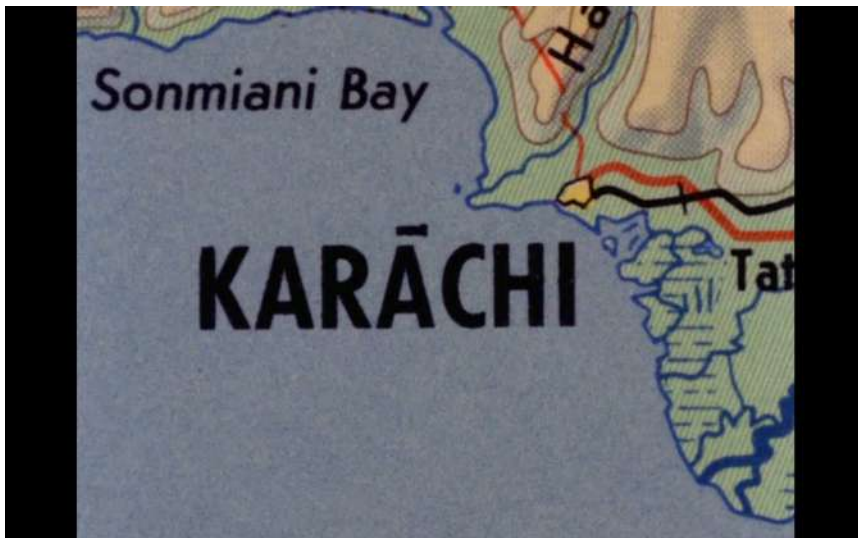
34. *Riddles of the Sphinx*



35. *AMY!*



36. *Turksib* (Turin, 1929)



37. *AMY!*



38. *AMY!*



39. *AMY!*



40. *AMY!*



41. *AMY!*



42. *AMY!*



43. *AMY!*



44. *Crystal Gazing*





45. *Crystal Gazing*



46. *Crystal Gazing*



47. *Crystal Gazing*



48. *Crystal Gazing*



49. *Crystal Gazing*



50. *Crystal Gazing*



51. *Crystal Gazing*



52. *Crystal Gazing*



53. *Crystal Gazing*



54. *Crystal Gazing*



55. *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*



56. *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*





57. *The Bad Sister*



58. *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958)



59. *The Bad Sister*



60. *Marnie* (Hitchcock, 1964)



61. *The Bad Sister*



62. *The Birds* (Hitchcock, 1963)



63. *The Bad Sister*



64. *The Bad Sister*



65. *The Bad Sister*



66. *The Bad Sister*



67. *The Bad Sister*

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