Women and Film:

Basic Considerations

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Degree of

Master of Science in Visual Studies
at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
June 1980

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May 9, 1980

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If we conceive of feminism as more than a frivolous label, if we conceive of it as an ethics, a methodology, a more complex way of thinking about, thus more responsibly acting upon, the conditions of human life, we need a self-knowledge which can only develop through a steady, passionate attention to all female experience. I cannot imagine a feminist evolution leading to radical change in the private/political realm of gender that is not rooted in the conviction that all women's lives are important; that the lives of men cannot be understood by burying the lives of women; and that to make visible the full meaning of women's experience, to reinterpret knowledge in terms of that experience is now the most important task of thinking.

Adrienne Rich[1]

> Women both have and have not had a common world. The mere sharing of oppression does not constitute a common world. Our thought and action, insofar as they have taken the form of difference, assertion, or rebellion, have repeatedly been obliterated, or subsumed under "human" history, which means the "publicity of the public realm" created and controlled by men. Our history is the history of a majority of the species, yet the struggles of women for a human status have been relegated to footnotes, to the sidelines. Above all, women's relationships with women have been denied or neglected as a force in history.[2]

The tendency to equate "human" with "male" and to examine and describe all things from a male point of view has resulted in an historical ignoring and misrepresenting of women's actual existence and participation in "human" achievements and day to day life, an insidious bias which permeates all information and even the very means by which it is transmitted.

Women ourselves are forced to use modes of expression to which the "fact" of male superiority is inherent. To illustrate with a quite literal case, that of language, in Spanish, for example, a woman when referring to herself and other women (who may number in the thousands) is expected to use the masculine third person plural pronoun as the correct form of address, if there is just one man present. This is just one example of the sorts of experiences which shape the nature and extent of women's alienation. The images of women that the media propagate are another.

We are constantly subjected to images of ourselves which are often, as in the case of advertising campaigns, conscious manipulations serving specific purposes. Even less intentionally distorted images succeed only in representing male fantasies of women, or a male perspective of situations. "Reality" as it is presented makes it difficult to gain a personal and global perspective free of the prevalent ideology. Conceptions and images apparently respond to "reality," but "reality" is also affected by conceptions and images. Conceptions, images, and reality are involved in a self-perpetuating cycle.

Gene Youngblood[3] addresses this issue with respect to the media in general. He counters the networks' claim when criticized for content that they are only catering to the public's taste, i.e., general culture, by reminding them that television also has the potential to, and does, generate taste and culture. Desire, he argues, is a direct function of experiences and the extent to which they can be stretched in the imagination. And meaning, of the sort which transcends personal codes, resides in a context, is determined by what is shared or held as common truths.

For their role in establishing large segments of this pool of commonalities, media, in such a media-oriented country as the U.S., are largely responsible. Whether or not they assume this responsibility, the media are responsible for the content as well as the manner in which information bits are presented and, ultimately, for the significance given them. True, views expressed partially reflect the desires and values of the majority, meaning that "majority" which is given a voice, i.e., which

is adopted and reinforced by the media.

That voice is not the voice of women. We take little or no part in generating it. When we are allowed to speak, or made to speak, it is more often than not in roles reflecting the prevalent ideology, fulfilling expectations.

Even variations in film messages and images are often only permutations of the same variables and give the illusion of change in perspective, while serving only to strengthen and perpetuate stereotypic conventions. I doubt that a statistical study of the depictions of women in the cinema is necessary to validate Claire Johnston's statement:

> It is probably true to say that despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent.[4]

In the documentary tradition, there has been an historic near absence of women filmmakers. A quote from part of the narration of a reel of Time-Life/Drew Associates film clips entitled "The Living Cinema" can serve, then, to generalize about women in documentaries through the '60s.

> The living camera is a man. It walks, sees, and hears as a man. It lives with people. These are real people, living through actual experiences. It sees their tenderness, and sadness, catches their anger and tension, shares their triumph and despair. Sees them in love. And in action. Nothing is arranged. The camera is constantly surprised. And challenged. And always discovering. Through the living camera you may see, hear, and discover for yourself.

More recently, non-commercial films, true to their independent nature,

portray a greater variety of views, some of which reflect changes in attitudes regarding women. In the last decade a series of women directors have emerged, but productions by all-women teams are more recent and few in number. As in all fields of study and occupations, women must struggle against the experience of existing in a male-oriented society, in which it is difficult to not interiorize roles and fulfill behavioral expectations.

Laura Malvey, in Women and the Cinema, addresses the problem that freeing herself of established concepts and patterns poses from the viewpoint of a woman filmmaker:

> . . . the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of the arrival of language) while still caught in the language of patriarchy.[5]

Women are increasingly involved in attempts to recover and record events, actions, and personages which have been historically ignored, distorted, or misrepresented. Women anthropologists, for example, are attempting to disclose the reality of women's position ignored or obscured by male bias in most anthropological observation. They have begun to formulate parameters with which to analyze the position and role of women in specific societies, as well as cross-culturally. These parameters can be useful as guidelines in the examination of previous records as well as in contemporary observation and, by extension, filmmaking. A brief review of several of the methods and results follows.

The concept of power is one parameter often utilized in comparing

the relative status of people. However, upon focusing on women's relation to power, women anthropologists realized that formal power is inextricably linked to the mechanisms which at once describe and conform it, and by which it is attained, and from which women have usually been excluded. Thus it was necessary to " . . . develop new concepts to identify clearly the areas of women's power and the factors that facilitate or obstruct its exercise."[6]

Feminist anthropologists, aware that "It is this question of the origins and perpetuation of gender-linked hierarchies which lies at the heart of the feminist perspective,"[7] attempting to more accurately describe the variation of sex-typing cross-culturally and uncover exceptions to commonly propagated images and roles, as well as reinterpreting relations underlying actual situations or observations, have approached the problem primarily from two directions.

Some concentrate on women's response to men's preemption of formal power, the means they are able to develop to affect their circumstances and the areas in which they are effective. According to Louise Lamphere,

> An individual's relationship to the distribution of power and authority in a domestic group is best conceptualized in terms of the strategies a person uses to achieve his or her ends.[8]

Others seek, as Paula Webster points out, to dissect power in any social context into the factors which comprise it, in order to determine how women's position is affected by each and the various combinations. Among the factors signalled are these:

external forces due to the community's inscription in a larger system

social organization, i.e., kinship systems, descent and residence patterns, etc.

women's control over their procreative ability, i.e., childbearing, sexual activity

division of labor

ownership of property

contribution to subsistence

role in distribution processes

differentiation between the domestic and public spheres

access to and control of knowledge

The economic and political relations within the larger society logically affect the authority structure of the domestic group. In turn, the options available to women are related to rules of descent and inheritance, marriage and access to economic resources.[9]

> Everywhere, from those societies we might want to call most egalitarian to those in which sexual stratification is most marked, men are the locus of cultural value. Some area of activity is always seen as exclusively or predominantly male, and therefore overwhelmingly and morally important. This observation has its corollary in the fact that everywhere men have some <u>authority</u> over women, that they have a culturally legitimated right to her subordination and compliance. At the same time, of course, women themselves are far from helpless, and whether or not their influence is acknowledged, they exert important pressures on the social life of the group . . .
>
> . . . while authority legitimates the use of power, it does not exhaust it, and actual methods of giving rewards, controlling information, exerting pressure,

> and shaping events may be available to women as well as to men.[10]

Thus, often behavior or attitudes viewed as negative, such as gossip, manipulation of loyalties, etc., are the only possible means of affecting circumstances available to women.[11]

Among the strategies at times adopted by women are: the taking on of men's roles and activities (usually in the privileged spheres of non-egalitarian societies), the formation of solidarity groups, assertion or denial of sexuality, association with the supernatural;[12] cooperation and/or conflict;[13] influence.[14]

Women's response to power and authority depends on a combination of factors.

> Women are always at a disadvantage in competing for power and prestige . . . but their handicap is least in those systems where leadership rests on ability and where there is little or no separation between the domestic and public spheres . . .[15]

In societies of this nature or those in which authority is shared, women's strategies focus on cooperation. A prime example of this occurs in the case of the community of Chignautla in the central highlands of Mexico, where men depend on their wives' disruptive maneuvers to secure the inheritance which enables them to establish themselves independently. A man's wife is also a prime agent in influencing public opinion toward the obtaining of status conferring <u>cargos</u>.[16]

> But in political systems where decisions are made

> outside the home and where leadership rests on control of resources available primarily to men, women are often excluded from direct personal participation. Confined to the home and defined as legal minors, women must work in concealed ways to gain their ends. In such systems women's efforts to achieve power are regarded as most disruptive, and overt ideology most consistently denies the wider implications of domestic disturbances.[17]

In societies with these characteristics, women's efforts are aimed at influencing those who hold authority.[18] In Zinacantan, Chiapas, Mexico, examples of such political struggles are evident:

> The several women who must live together in an extended patrilocal household . . . exhibit a characteristic pattern of domestic quarrels, and these quarrels affect wider political alignments by causing a redistribution of the people who form the core of the leader's following.[19]

While recognition of women's actual participation in society is essential to a more balanced perspective, efforts to view women's position vis-a-vis men in terms of equal but separate statuses are somewhat unrealistic. In the continuum spanning the private and public domains (in societies where they are differentiated), power seems ultimately to lie in the public domain, i.e., in the hands of men.

Even in communities such as the one described by Susan Carol Rodgers in France in which . . .

> . . . the society is domestic-oriented, that is, the domestic sphere is of central importance, at least socially, and has important implications for life

> beyond the domestic . . . most ordinary and important interactions occur in the context of face-to-face community where informal relationships and forms of power are at least as significant a force in everyday life as formalized, authorized relationships and power,[20]

men nevertheless are in possession of enough prestige to warrant a balance between power and prestige in the form of a "myth of male dominance."

> Because extra-domestic activities are given highest prestige it is to men's advantage to claim the village sphere as their own. It is to the peasant woman's advantage as well, because it leaves her in control of the domestic sphere, which is the central unit of the community and the only sphere over which villagers may have much control. Here we have a power/prestige balance between the two spheres. It remains balanced as long as prestige is accorded to activities and actors in one, while actual power emanates from activities in the other.[21]

Though the relation can be upset by circumstances which alter the balance, either by reducing or increasing the measures of power or prestige, or by a change in the proportions of mutual interdependence, the concession of prestige to male activities which are practically ineffectual remains largely unjustified.

That the existence of different spheres or domains of power and the possibility of separate parameters for measuring women's and men's power are significant in theory but are rendered pragmatically meaningless, is further illustrated by the situation of many black American women. Studies reveal that families are characterized by flexible and extended boundaries, socialization is similar for boys and for girls, and the mother is usually strong, resourceful and structurally central as well as economically

essential.[22] Yet, though these characteristics probably account for the fact that ". . . among Black professional people, although the female-male ratio is very low, as in all professions, there are proportionately more Black women than white women in the professions,"[23] reports show that black women receive consistently lower wages than white men, black men, white women, in that order. Though indispensable within the family, they are virtually powerless in terms of the larger society in which it is inscribed.

In general, the relation of both sexes to the factors related to power and the effectiveness of their responses to them seem to be colored by a society's basic differential valuation of the sexes.

As is true of the relationship between knowledge and power, that between cultural valuation and power is also circular. "The social position of women and men both reflects and reinforces cultural concepts about sex-linked character traits and capabilities."[24]

The value system guides the creation of the mechanisms by which it is perpetuated. Strategies adopted or sources of informal power are both a reflection and a measure of existing relations to power. The factors which constitute power are also the criteria by which it may be analyzed.

Though it is necessary to expand this exploration into the reasons for the maintenance of existing values and relations, the approaches discussed are helpful in initial efforts to more accurately analyze situations and begin to represent women as varied as we are, and as beings subject to specific socially imposed controls, but also with unrecognized

potential, capabilities, and achievements, rather than as creatures with certain innate qualities and limited, predictable responses, as has been the case.

Footnotes

1. Adrienne Rich, "Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women (1976)," On Lies, Secrets and Silences (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1979), p. 213.

2. Ibid., pp. 203-4.

3. Paraphrase of parts of a lecture he gave at the MIT Film/Video Section, February 26, 1980.

4. Jill Johnston, Gullibles Travels (New York: Link Books, 1974), p. 198.

5. Claire Johnston, "Myths of Women in the Cinema," in Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, eds., Women and the Cinema (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), p. 410.

6. Laura Malvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Kay and Peary, eds., op. cit., p. 413.

7. Paula Webster, "Matriarchy: A Vision of Power," Rayna Reiter, ed., Towards an Anthropology of Women (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), p.

8. Rayna Reiter, "The Search for Origins: Unraveling the threads of gender hierarchy," Critique of Anthropology (Vol. 3, 1977), p. 5.

9. Louise Lamphere, "Strategies, Cooperation, and Conflict Among Women in Domestic Groups," in Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., Women, Culture, and Society (Standord: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 94.

10. Ibid., p. 108.

11. Michelle Z. Rosaldo, "Woman Culture and Society: A Theoretical Over-View," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, eds., op. cit., p. 21.

12. Ernestine Freidl, Women and Men: An Anthropologist's View (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), p. 95.

13. Rosaldo, op. cit., passim.

14. Lamphere, op. cit., passim.

15. Rosaldo, op. cit.; Lamphere, op. cit.; Jane F. Collier, "Women in Politics," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, eds., op. cit.; passim.

16. Collier, op. cit., p. 91.

17. Doren L. Slade, "Marital Status and Sexual Identity: The position of women in a Mexican peasant society," in Ruby Rohrlick-Leavitt, ed., Women Cross-Culturally: Change and Challenge (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), passim.

18. Collier, op. cit., pp. 91-92.

19. Lamphere, op. cit., p. 100.

20. Collier, op. cit., p. 92.

21. Susan C. Rogers, "Female forms of power and the myth of male dominance: A model of female-male interaction in peasant society," American Ethnologist (Vol. 2, no. 4, 1975), p. 730.

22. Ibid., p. 746.

23. Nancy Tanner, "Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa and Among Black Americans," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, eds., op. cit., p. 151.

24. Ibid., p. 154.

25. Rohrlich-Leavitt, ed., op. cit., p. 597.

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