Feminism is among the social movements and cultural—critical discourses that most definitively shaped the rise of Anglo-American film studies in the 1970s; in turn, film studies, a relatively young and politicized field, provided fertile ground for feminist theory to take root in the academy. Feminist film studies, emerging from this juncture, has been both highly specialized in its theoretical debates on representation, spectatorship, and sexual difference, and broad in its cultural reach and influence. It has also involved a dual focus on critique and cultural production.

As a critical methodology, feminism makes salient the category of gender and gender hierarchy in all forms of knowledge and areas of inquiry. The female image—the female as image—has been a central feature of film and related visual media; in film criticism and theory, making gender the axis of analysis has entailed a thoroughgoing reconsideration of films for, by, and about women, and a consequent transformation of the canons of film studies. Bringing into focus the overlooked contributions of women to film history has been a key objective of feminist film studies as well as an organizing principle of women's film festivals and journalism. A concern with representation, in both a political sense (of giving voice to or speaking on behalf of women) and an aesthetic sense, has also united the activist and theoretical projects of women's film culture. Over the past two decades, in the context of feminist politics and women's studies in the academy, feminist film studies has extended its analysis of gender in film to interrogate the representation of race, class, sexuality, and nation; encompassed media such as television and video into its paradigm; and contributed to the rethinking of film historiography, most notably in relation to consumer culture. The feminist interest in popular culture's relation to the socially disenfranchised has influenced film studies' shift from textual analysis and subject positioning to broader cultural studies of institutions and audiences. A postmodern, globalized, technologically saturated social reality has set new questions for feminist theory and methodology as for the whole of film studies.

In film criticism and theory, making gender the axis of analysis has entailed a thoroughgoing reconsideration of films for, by, and about women, and a consequent transformation of the canons of film studies.

An account of principal issues, texts, and debates that have established feminist critical studies of film as a unique area of inquiry will be followed by a
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discussion of some of the diverse women's film production practices with which the field has engaged.

Feminist film criticism and theory

Most histories of the field of feminist film studies find a starting-point in the appearance of several book-length popular studies of women in film in the United States in the early 1970s (e.g. Rosan 1973; Haskell 1974; Mulvany 1974). Their focus on 'images of women' was immediately criticized by 'cinefeminists' interested in theorizing the structure of representation. As a result, an opposition—rhetorical in part—arose between 'American sociological approaches' and 'British' theory, of 'cinefeminism', which was based upon a critique of realism.

Reflection theory

Molly Haskell and Marjorie Rosen's studies are usually considered exemplars of 'reflection theories' of women and film. They assume that film 'reflects' social reality, that depictions of women in film mirror how society treats women, that these depictions are distortions of how women 'really are' and what they 'really want', and that 'progress' can be made (see Petri 1994). Such accounts are related to powerful feminist critiques of the effects of mainstream media pornography, and advertising on body image, sex roles, and violence against women, which, in turn, fuelled advocacy and women's intervention in image-making. Typically, such studies present and critique a typology of images of women—an array of virgins, vampas, victims, suffering mothers, child women, and sex kittens. The emerging film criticism of lesbians, as well as African American and Asian American women, and other women of colour, also tends to identify and reject stereotypes—such as the homocidal, man-hating lesbian, the African American mammy, the tragic mulatto, and the Asian dragon lady—and advocates more complex representations. Those are categories, however, which tend to limit consideration of the social, economic, and ethnic effects that stigmatize and frequentlv lead to simplistic 'good/bad' readings of individual films. The identification of types and generic conventions is an important step, but simply replacing stereotypes with positive images does not transform the system that produced them. Haskell narrates the history of film as an arc from 'reverence' (the silent era at) to 'repeal' (Hollywood in the 1960s and 1970s); the high point is represented by the strong, independent heroines of the 1950s, which reached its apotheosis in stars such as Katharine Hepburn. Presenting herself as a maverick critic, Haskell frequently distances herself from feminism, neglects to consider non-white women, and betrays a profound heterosexism (Hepburn and Tracy are for her the romantic ideal of complementarity of the sexes). Yet she makes several useful contributions, and criticism of the reductionism of her study can still be reforms. She diagnoses violence against, and marginalization of, women in films as questions to the emergence of feminism and the threat posed by women's autonomy, and she is wary of the mystifications of European art cinema, which would appear to place women in their sexual and their emotional roles in their stories, while offering only a new version of the 'eternal femininity'. Finally, Haskell's comments on the women's pictures, or 'weepies', a production category denigrated by the industry and most critics—suggest that such films actually did represent the contradictions of women's lives in patriarchal capitalism and inaugurated one of the most fruitful areas of feminist film studies.

Semiotics and ideology critique

Reviewing Haskell and Rosen's books, Claire Johnston (1975b) notes such inferences of the 'images as women' approach: while it grasps the ideological implications of cinema, images are seen as too easily detached from the texts and psychic structures through which they function within the contextual and historical contexts that determine their form and their reception. For Johnston, film must be seen as a language and women as a sign—not simply a transpar- rent rendering of the real (see also Pollock 1992). In perhaps the most influential statement of this position, 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema' (Johnston 1973) combines Roland Barthes' concept of myth as the rendering natural of ideology with auteur theory to decode the function of women in Hollywood films by Howard Hawks and John Ford, as well as women auteurs Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino. This, in turn, set a pattern for subsequent feminist studies of Hollywood genre cinema as noir, the musical, and the western, which showed how women as signifiers perform precise iconographic and ideological functions, either constituting a genre's structural dimensions (women = home in the western) or exposing its ideological contradictions (the femme fatale figure in film noir, see Kaplan 1978).

In this latter case, as Janet Bergetrom (1979) points out, Johnston and others were influenced by the concept of the 'progressive text' derived from the French journal Cahiers du cinema. Indeed, the progressive text, or popular film which 'displayed the ideology to which it belonged' (Cornell and Narboni 1969), was the chief inheritance of feminist film studies from Marxist cultural theory (through the Russian Formalist notion of 'making strange', to Brechtian 'distanciation' and Althusserian 'contradiction') and shaped the ongoing interest in Hollywood film. Cahiers' methodology was also assimilated by the British Journal Screen, which emulated as the dominant venue of work combining structuralism, semiotics, Marxism, and psychoanalysis and the touchstone for developments in feminist film theory.

Psychoanalysis

The most thoroughgoing and explicit introduction of neo-Freudian psychoanalytic theory to feminist film studies is the single most inseparable reference in the field (and arguably in contemporary English-language film theory as a whole). It is one of Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', published in Screen in 1975. Recommending a 'political use of psychoanalysis', this essay, like Johnston's 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema', was polemical both in tone and in its advocacy of theoretical rigor and a new, materialist feminist cinematic practice. However, whereas Johnston had argued that in order to counter our complicity in the cinema, women's collective fantasy must be released, . . . and[ly] demands the use of the entertain- ment film', Mulvey insisted on a break with domi- nant cinema (in the form of a modernist cinematic practices which would provoke conscious reflection on the part of the spectator) and the 'rejection of pleasure as a racial weapon'. This position derived from her account of the gendered processes of spectator desire and identification orchestrated by classical nar- rative cinema and is summed up in one of her piece's headings: 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look'.

Mulvey argued that the institution of cinema is characterized by a sexual imbalance of power, and psycho- analysis may be used to explain this. Because psychoanalysis makes sexual difference its central category, feminist thinking can use it to understand women's exclusion from the realms of language, law, and desire—from, in short, what Jacques Lacan called the symbolic register. Freud's description of scopophilia—pleasure in looking—was Mulvey's starting-point. Dominant cinema does not screen and thus frustrate women in which the image of woman functions as signifier of sexual difference, confirming man as subject and maker of meaning. These mechanisms are built into the structure of the gaze and narrative itself through the manipulation of time and space by point of view, framing, editing, and other codes.

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Central around the spectator's and the camera's look, cinema offers identifiability pleasure with one's on-screen likeness, or ego ideal (understood in terms of the Lacanian mirror stage), and libidinal gratification from the object of the gaze. The male spectator is doubly supported by these mechanisms of visual gratification as the gaze is relayed from the male surrogate within the degree to the male spectator in the audi- ence. The woman, on the other hand, is defined in terms of spectacle, or what Mulvey described as 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. As Mulvey observed, 'in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female'. Mulvey excluded from consideration the possible pleasures afforded a female spectator by narrative cinema through her provocative use of the male pro- noun to designate the spectator. As she explained later, her essay explored 'the relationship between the image of woman on camera and the male spectator'.

Yet if the image of woman is to be 'looked at', it also, according to the Freudian account, connotes sexual desire and a threat of castration that must be con- tained. According to Mulvey, narrative cinema has developed two ways to neutralize this threat, which she correlates with the filmic practices of two of film
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theory's most privileged authors: Josef von Sternberg and Alfred Hitchcock. Sternberg's baroque composition, centered around the impersonally stylized image of Marlene Dietrich, are seen as exemplars of a fascististic disavowal of the threat of sexual difference. In the Freudian scenario, the fetish stands in for the missing penis, and the fetishist disavows his knowledge of lack with belief in the compensatory object. The oblique narratives and iconic, layered compositions in von Sternberg's films exemplify, therefore, what Mulvey called fascististic scopophilia.

In another oft-quoted formula, Mulvey described the second avenue of eroticizing castration anxiety as voyeurism gratified by investigation and punishment or redemption of the 'guilty' (that is, different, female) object: 'sadism demands a story,' she wrote. For example, the angst-ridden, ill-fated world of film noir is stabilized by pinning guilt on the femme fatale. Mulvey argued that Alfred Hitchcock's films (Vertigo, USA, 1958, and Rear Window, USA, 1954) brilliantly fuse the fascististic and voyeuristic sadistic solutions to the threat posed by the image of women, and her reading inaugurated a rich strain of feminist work on the director.

Prior to Mulvey, psychoanalytic film theory had tended to confine the hegemony and homogeneity of the patriarchal unconscious in cinema. Christian Metz extrapolated the cinematic fetishism (considered an exclusively male perversion) to define the spectator's belief in the cinematic illusion itself. Jean-Louis Baudrillard argued that the cinematic apparatus of the film is not only a technological and institutional, but also a psychologico-sensory transformation system to posit an image as an object of desire, an object of subjecthood; and the theory of spectatorial practices, defined as 'cinematic syntax,' by Gaylyn Studlar (1988), for example, argues that this is the effect-and the self-sufficiency-of the cinematic apparatus. This theory also argued that the spectator's relation to the image signifies sexual difference as a crucial component of the film's form and shape.

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marked to and consumed by female audiences. Typically, such films are concerned with evoking emotional responses to such women’s issues as heterosexual romance, domesticity, and motherhood. While some feminists have rejected such traditional associations, particularly their survival in contemporary popular culture, others have found in them an expression, however mediated, of women’s contradictory experience in the patriarchal family. Indeed, the films have seemed to offer the opportunity to decode the mother as an ideological construct and to come to terms with the pre-feminist generation of ‘mothers’. From the perspective of genre theory, the woman’s film could be seen as performing ‘cultural work’—speaking to, displacing, genuine social conflicts—between women’s economic dependence and desire for autonomy, between heterosexual and maternal ideology and sexual self-definition. The woman’s film thus links the focus on ‘deceptions of women’ in sociological criticism with cinefeminists’ concern with ‘the figure of the woman’. Their methodologies and evaluations, even their organizing questions, differ, however.

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In her influential study The Desire to Desire (1987), Mary Ann Doane develops a theory of female spectatorship through intricate textual analyses of films produced for a female audience in wartime Hollywood. Identifying ‘narrative’, ‘medical’, and ‘parasitic’ subgenres of the woman’s film, Doane demonstrates the frequency of overt thematizations of psychoanalysis in their depictions of family, romance, and domestic settings. Further readings uncover scenarios of masochism and hysteria that confirm Lacanian psychoanalytical definitions of femininity as deficiency or lack. Analysing the designation ‘woman’s film’ in terms of both possession and address, Doane concludes that such films ultimately position the women they address as subject to, rather than of, the discourse of desire. Like the Joan Crawford character in the woman’s film, Crawford, Tooke (1947), the female spectator is disposed of regardless of what appears to be her own story.

In a crucial contribution to spectatorship theory, ‘Film and the Masquerade’ (1982), Doane argues that the visual economy and aesthetic intensity of the woman’s film encourages the female spectator to co-identify with the image. According to the psychoanalytic model of sexual difference, the distance upon which fetishism, desire, and even criticism depend is simply not available to her. The woman is deficient in relation to the gaze. The title and plot conceit of Dark Victory (USA, 1939), in which the heroine must insist being able to see so that the hero (but not the audience) will leave her to suffer and die alone, serves as a hyperbolic illustration. When Doane acknowledges that it is ‘quasi tempting to foreground entirely the possibility of female spectatorship’, her statement must be seen in the context of feminist anti-essentialism: ‘the woman’ of the woman’s film does not exist—a dicussive category produced within a phallocentric representationa regime. Doane proposes a new trope for female spectatorship: masquerade, defined by Freudian analyst Joan Riviere as indistinguishable from ‘genuine work, and her female cinematic characters can provide a means of “flaunting” femininity’s lack.

Unwilling to reject films that historically have given women social and pleasure, other feminist theories argue that female spectatorship encompasses more than masochism or narcissism. Although, as Ann Kaplan argues (1986a), Stella Dallas (USA, 1937) does indeed end with an extravagantly novel scene of female empowerment which appears on the surface to address the issue of female spectatorship, in particular, other films can be seen as engaging with the broader spectre of the functionalist film. Doane’s critical response to The Woman’s Film (1982) identifies the kinds of visual similarities and differences between the films.

In contrast with Doane’s approach, another film critic, Linda Williams, argues that in women’s representations, the connotation of the discrepancy between the way women are represented in the films and the way women are represented to the audience.

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feminist analyses had little to say about the signifying effects of a star image in a particular contextual system—let alone about how the interaction between text and spectator might be determined by knowledge and anticipation of the star; by, in short, intertextuality. This careful avoidance was in part a reaction to work such as Haskell’s which followed journalistic conventions of writing about characters and stars, and in part a more general extension of the theory of the image of the woman as male fetish and its identification with ideological complicity.

The increasing influence of cultural studies (identi- fiad with the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies), which looks beyond the film text for the social meaning of cinematic practices, as well as of approaches in film history that include institutional and promotional discourses and reception studies, invigorated work on film stars. As Judith Mayne (1993: 124) notes, the consequences of this shift in perspective are immediate: taking stars into account makes it hard to accept that the fascination of the movies inheres in the repressive pleasure of the projection situation, as apparatus theory argued. This approach is of particular interest to feminists, not only because female stars are the most powerful women in the film industry and represent ideologically significant constructions of femininity but because they are less visible than male stars. This increased visibility of the star image in the films is not a new phenomenon. The reception of the star constructed image in the film industry is constructed in particular with the construction of female spectators as fictive stars.

The female spectator is constructed as a consumer who is constructed from pre-existing cultural representations of femininity.
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camp roles and their reception and imitation in gay male culture. This "structured polymorphy" of a star image allows the figure to be claimed by diverse audiences and generates unpredictable effects in a range of reception contexts over time.

For example, the "myth" and self-sufficiency of Dietrich and Garbo (evident in their visual presentation as well as the plots of their films), the former's cruelty to men and the latter's tragic relation to love, as well as costuming codes and their on-screen flirtations with women, have been understood not only as open to appropriation by lesbian spectators today but as drawing on the visual strategies of lesbian self-representation in the 1930s. Black or ethnically coded star-images, such as those of Lena Horne or Carmen Miranda, have been decoded in relation to fantasies of racialized sexuality and the construction of American national identity and as figures of oppositional identification for non-white spectators (see Roberts 1993), and studies of national cinemas have increasingly mined the semiotic riches of popular star images.

The analysis of stars entails both sociological and psychoanalytic approaches and touches on several important directions in contemporary feminist film studies: placing the cinema within consumer culture, historicizing film exhibition and reception, and understanding active spectatorship as a practice of 'negotiation'. Historically, cinema emerges within the culture of consumption. Once again it is not unreasonarable to suggest that women are not marginalized as spectators, with no access except through disempowering identification with femininity-as-commodity in the figure of the star, but energetically addressed as consumers. Miriam Hansen (1991) looks at the Valen tinio craze in the 1920s as a definitive moment in locating female sexuality in modernity and the public sphere. Fan culture involves a range of concrete practices of consumption, purveyed by magazines, fash ions, and commodity tie-ins. Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (1987) demonstrate that disempowering identification with femininity-as-commodity is a crucial dimension of the persona of 'women's stars' such as Joan Crawford. Consumerist discourse works in as much as it retrospectively defines women's films, often as a potent ally of women's attempts to define herself or satisfy her desire. Consumer goods and the surfaces of costume, skin, and hair also offer non-narrative, tactile, and visual pleasures to women. Television, which addresses consumers in the home, extends such dimensions of women's viewing practices; arguably, the television 'apparatus' itself is feminized. Television

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presumed in Laura Mulvey's influential model, it has been women's film production, rather than reception, that has been the most prominent model of resistance and opposition to the status quo. Not simply an important parallel sector of 'feminism in films', women's film-making practice has been a constant reference and dynamic ground for theoretical work. Reclaiming women filmmakers' work within mainstream industries and in national and alternative film movements entails the re-evaluation of concepts of film authorship and criteria of film historiography and raises interesting methodological questions, such as the role of the critic in the definition of a 'feminist' film and the problem of essentialism (the notion that all women or all women's films share inherent qualities). The next sections look at areas of women's production that have raised particu larly generative issues for feminist film studies.

Women's filmmaking

One of the most important discoveries of women's film festivals was that the pioneering role women played in the emergence of film. Alice Guy-Blaché is widely credited with directing the very first fiction film in 1896. She ran hundreds of short films in France and later in the United States, and more than twenty feature films through her film company. She was a writer-producer, director, and wrote a book on filmmaking, helping to establish the film industry. Although she is not widely known, her work has been rediscovered in recent years. In 1991, a retrospective of her work was held at the Museum of Modern Art, and a biography was published. Her films, which include early shorts and feature films, are now being screened at film festivals around the world.

In Hollywood

Independent women directors and producers who flourished in the first decades of filmmaking were quickly marginalized by the entrance of the Hollywood studio system and its eventual dominance of world-wide markets. Studies of women who exercised creative control in sound-era Hollywood such as screenwriters (see France, 1994) or stars represent a challenge to the construction of film authorship with the figure of the director. But the few women who did work as directors in the heyday of Hollywood—Dorothy Arzner, who directed her first feature at Paramount, where she had been an editor, in 1927, and made sixteen more films before retiring from the movies in 1943, and Ida Lupino, a leading actress at Warner's who turned independent director in 1949 and later directed for television—have played a central role in feminist film historiography and criticism.

Clara Johnson's and Pam Cook's contributions to The Work of Dorothy Arzner (Johnson 1975s) combined the work of recovery with the critical model developed in Johnson's Women's Cinema in American Cinema'. The authors looked not for coherent feminist expression in Arzner's work, but for traces of "the woman's discourse", readable in the "spaces and fissures" of the classic text. One such moment in Arzner's 1940 film Dance, Girl, Dance, in which the female character

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preservation movements and new interpretations of early film history emerging in the 1980s have assisted feminist efforts to restore women's contributions to silent cinema. The role of women in the public sphere—in political and social movements, labour, leisure, and the culture of consumption—and in the formation of national identities in the first decades of the twentieth century, have been illuminated by recent studies of Neapolitan filmmaker Elvira Notari (Bruno 1990) and of Nell Shipman, the Canadian-born director of outdoor adventure films (Armatage 1995).

Feminist film scholars' questioning of established film canons draws on the retrieval of women authors and influences in feminist literary criticism. But cinema not only presents a much more limited history and scope than literature; it raises the difficulty of defining authorship, given the capital and technology-intensive, commercial and collaborative nature of film production, especially in Hollywood.
Art film, new national cinemas, third cinema

The European 'art film' has produced a number of indisputable female auteurs. Although they might make fewer compromises to commerce or popular taste than women working within the mainstream industries, their work is even less easily assimilable to the mainstream catalogue. This, however, makes them interesting to feminist critics. The paradigmatic case is Leni Riefenstahl, documentarian to the Third Reich. Susan Sontag's influential study (1972) of a consistent fascist aesthetic in Riefenstahl's work from Triumph of the Will (Germany, 1935) and Olympia (Germany, 1938) to her African photography of the 1960s, also lays the groundwork for decoding the Riefenstahl persona. Her celebration as 'female artist' works to place her outside history (and politics), subjecting her to the same codes governing the representation of women in film. Johnston (1973) criticized the films of French New Wave director Agnès Varda for perpetuating the mythology of woman as essentially unknowable and childlike, signifier of nature and sexuality for men. The male protagonists and fraught sexual politics of the Italian director Liliana Cavani, initially regarded as evidence that women directors could indeed make anti-feminist films, have been read more subtly by Kaja Silverman (1978) as 'aesthetic projections that unwittingly reproduce power hierarchies. Hungarian director Márta Mészáros in Hungary has built up a body of feature films unusual for a woman director, permitting auteurist analysis while expanding West European concepts of feminism and film. However, these directors' achievements must be seen not as exceptional, but inside history, politics, and national contexts. Thus, feminist critical interest has foregrounded the work of women within the New German Cinema, too often identified only with its male proponents (see Segioh, Part 3, Chapter 10) and in Australian cinema (see Jacta, Part 3, Chapter 16). In the case of "Third Cinema" (see Diannystate, Part 3, Chapter 1B) which explicitly opposed commercially controlled 'First' cinemas and auteurist 'art' or 'Second', cinema, several women's films have been seen as definitive. The single feature Afro-Cuban director Sara Gomez completed before her untimely death, One Way or Another (De ciertas maneras, Cuba, 1977) has been widely hailed as Brechtian post-colonial feminist cinema. Its dialectical structure of romance plot and documentary analysis of economic conditions stresses the necessity of consciousness-raising around sexual politics as an integral part of the transformation of social norms. Caribbean-born Sarah Maladora depicted revolutionary women's struggle in Angola in Sambizanga (1972) and women's film collectives formed in Columbia, Brazil, and Peru, and in the Indian subcontinent. The introduction of the films of Third-world women into the canon of Eurocentric feminist cinema, however, should not homogenize the strategies and conditions within which they intervened: feminist, Marxist, and anti-imperialist paradigms have not always overlapped.

Avant-Garde and counter-cinema

Despite vast disparities in resources, conditions of production, and audience, most of the work discussed so far shares the general qualities of feature-length, narrative form, produced with some division of labor, and aimed for theatrical exhibition. Avant-garde work conceived outside that model has historically been an important venue for women; the various avant-garde movements offer feminist critiques examples of 'auteurs' in the strictest sense, as well as grounds for theories of alternative film language. Germaine Dulac claims the title of first feminist filmmaker; she played a prominent role in the French avant-garde as an educator and theorist, as well as the maker of abstract, narrative, and documentary films. In her most important film, The Smiling Mona Baudet (France, 1923), Dulac infused the conventional narrative about a provincial wife with experimental techniques rendering the protagonist's frustration and fantasy. For Sandy Fliesman-Lewis (1989), Dulac's career exemplified 'a search for a new cinematic language capable of expressing female desire'.

While feminist film theory has consistently championed formal experimentation, the avant-garde's ethos of personal expression can be seen to foreclose consistent socio-political critique and, frequently, significant engagement with audiences.

In the poetically randomized subjective space of Meshes of the Afternoon (USA, 1943) and subsequent works, Russian-born Maya Deren could be said to be conducting a similar search. Beyond the general influence that earned her the rather dubious epithet 'mother of the American avant-garde', Deren's aesthetic innovations were paid homage in the explicitly feminist work of experimental filmmakers in the 1970s such as Joyce Wieland in Canada and lesbian feminist Barbara Hammer in the United States. Economically accessible and institutionally alternative, avant-garde film has given a significant place to American women since at least the 1950s yet the movement has been pervaded by a male heroic modernism. In an article arguing for the political importance of naming women's media practices, B. Ruby Rich calls the avant-garde the Cinema of the Sons, a cinema of rebellion against the dominant Cinema of the Fathers. Rich (1988) suggests that avant-garde feminist film theory has consistently championed formal experimentation, the avant-garde's ethos of personal expression can be seen to foreclose consistent socio-political critique and, frequently, significant engagement with audiences.

The women's film has been privileged in the corpus of feminist film theory and has tended to be formed of 'counter-cinema' (see Smith, Part 3, Chapter 2) which questions the centrality of the image of women to representation as the cinematic signifying systems such as editing or the synchronization of sound and image, narrative logic, the structure of the look, processes of voyeurism and identification. These films have also been linked by the concerns of writers such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luca Irigaray with the concept of feminine writing (écriture feminine). Perhaps the most commented-upon text was Belgian director Chantal Akerman's minimalist three-hour portrait of a middle-class housewife-prostitute: Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (Belgium and France, 1975) which depicted traditional femininity from a feminist stance (see Fowler, Part 3, Chapter 13). Julia Dolby and Peter Wollen's exploration of Lacanian and Freudian theory from the mother's point of view in Riddles of the Sphinx (GB, 1975), Sally Potter's experimental short thriller GB (1979), and American dancer-choreographer-filmmaker Yvonne Rainer's film about a woman who . . . USA, 1974) and The Man Who Envied Women (USA, 1985) have also generated considerable debate (see Kuhn 1994; Kaplan 1983). For Mary Ann Doane, these filmmakers have attempted 'the elaboration of a special syntax for the female body' (1988: 227) and their concerns with language, desire, and identity have found an important critical venue in the US feminist film journal Camera Obscura.

Documentary

Although generally under-represented in academic criticism, the mode of filmmaking in which women's intervention has been most extensive and influential, which feminists first entered, and which remains most accessible to emerging artists, including women and people of color, is documentary. In 1974 the National Film Board of Canada set up Studio D, a women's documentary unit, and more than 100 films, of whose style Sonia Klein's indictment of which was Love Story (1981) is characteristic, have been made and distributed within that favourable institutional climate. Cinema verité and 'talking heads', interview-based formats allowed women to speak for themselves and to narrate history—exemplifying the feminist slogan 'the personal is the political'. Such films were meant to raise consciousness and to effect social
change, addressing viewers in an accessible style and encouraging an active response. Hence, the form is particularly effective in constructing a community. In the heyday of ‘ideological criticism,’ these documentary practices tended to be charged with a ‘naïve realism.’ Barbara Kopple’s important feature-length documentary Harlan County USA (1976), for example, was critiqued for effecting the choices made in filming and editing that built narrative suspense. However, Julia Lesage makes a convincing case for ‘the political aesthetics of feminist documentary film’ in her essay of that title (1990)—arguing that such films construct, among other things, an iconography of everyday women completely absent from mainstream media—and the radical film magazine Jump Cut, of which Lesage is a founding editor, maintains a critical and aesthetic engagement with political films.

In the influential film Daughter Rite (1978), Michelle Citron, a contributor to Jump Cut, drew upon the immediacy and identificatory appeal of documentary while questioning its form. The film juxtaposed a cinema verité interview with a pair of sisters with journal entries and home movie footage in order to explore the fraught connection between mother and daughter. Only by reading the credits does the viewer learn that the ‘interviews’ are scripted, but the film’s emotional resonance, achieved through the autobiographical voice and the shared experience of being a daughter, is not diminished thereby. More recent work such as Mona Hatoum’s Measures of Distance (1988) and Nipazi’s The Body Beautiful (1991) inscribe new subject positions—those of the diasporic daughter, the black daughter, and the mother herself—within the hybrid documentary ‘genre’. Daughter Rite might be credited with founding (see Kuhn, 1994).

Such polyphony—of voices, points of view, and filmic idioms—increasingly characterizes feminist documentaries, particularly the self-representations of women of colour. This has, in turn, revitalized critical approaches to the form. In particular, an emerging body of theory takes on ethnographic film’s traditional gaze at the ‘Other’, foregrounding questions of authenticity, authority, and testimony in the work of indigenous media-makers and critical anthropologists. No figure has been more crucial to this revision in feminist film studies than Vietnamese American filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha (1991). In Reassemblage (1982) the filmmaker’s voice-over states her intention not to speak about the Senegalese women the image track depicts in unexpected framings and discontinuous editing, but to ‘speak nearly’.

With the widespread availability of the relatively inexpensive medium of video, women’s media genres, exhibition venues, and critical paradigms have also proliferated. Lightweight and unobtrusive, the camcorder rejuvenated activist documentary, enabled the production of erotic videos by and for women, and reflected the ‘identity politics’ of the 1980s in an expanding body of independent work by women of colour and lesbians. Television commissions, women’s film festivals, and the institutionalization of women’s studies and film studies ensure that women’s media culture remains a meeting-place of makers, users, and critics, although the symbiotic relationship that existed in the early 1980s between a certain kind of filmmaking practice and feminist film theory seems to have passed. This is due in part to the fact that the corpus is so much larger, in part to the maturation and harka diversification of feminist film studies as a discipline, and in part to larger cultural fragmentation of various kinds. Feminist filmmakers’ interventions in cinematic language fit well with the 1970s and early 1980s focus in film theory on textual analysis—whether of dominant or modernist films. However, postmodernism, multiculturalism, and cultural studies has demanded a shift to contextual and local analysis, in which the boundaries between dominant and alternative, resistance and appropriation, production and reception, are significantly remapped. ‘Diasporan’, black, gay and lesbian, and other independent cinemas, and the cultural contexts in which they have circulated, have all required the reformulation of critical frameworks. As Tereza de Laurets writes: ‘If we rethink the problem of a specificity of women’s cinema and aesthetic forms . . . in terms of address—who is making films for whom, who is looking and speaking, how, where, and to whom—then what has been seen as . . . an ideological split within feminist film culture between theory and practice, or between formalism and activism, may appear to be the very strength, the drive and productive heterogeneity of feminism’ (de Laurets 1985/1990: 296).

Conclusion

Paris Cook wrote in 1975 that ‘from the outset, the Women’s Movement has assumed without question the importance of mobilizing the media for women’s
struggle, at the same time subjecting them to a pro-
cess of interrogation" (1975: 36). While carrying out
two-pronged strategy, feminist film studies has estab-
lished itself as an academic field. If the terms of
once-heated arguments—around the usefulness
of psychoanalysis, the privileged status of Hollywood,
the primacy of sexual difference—appear to have
been superseded, contemporary debates are clearly
founded upon them. Feminist cultural studies of pop-
ular cinema understand ‘progressive texts’ in social
contexts: films such as Fatal Attraction (USA, 1987),
Alphas (USA, 1980), and Thelma and Louise (USA,
1991) have therefore been analysed in terms of social
anxieties about feminism, genre-mixing, popular
views, and feminist appropriation. Queer theory
has introduced the concept of gender performative
to studies of film: representation and spectatoral
response, drawing on psychoanalytic feminist theory’s
understanding of sexual identity as unstable, while
challenging heteronormative assumptions and giving
voice to a new cultural politics. Transnational exhibition
practices confirm that hypotheses of the film text as a
bodied object and the spectator as fixed (or
Western and male) are untenable: viewers, critics, and
media practitioners mobilise ‘the politics of location’
to counter new forms of Hollywood hegemony with stra-
tegic new voices (see Shohat and Stam 1994). Such
diversity and ongoing contradictory methods, objects, and
affiliations constitute the productive heterogeneity of
current feminist film culture.

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