



Lizzie Borden: Born in Flames (1983).

ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?
– An interview with Teresa de Lauretis

HISTORY

LÄHIKUVA¹: The psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory of the 70's was extensively universal and a historical, whereas during the 80's the role of history seems to become more important. What is the relevance of history in Your work?

Teresa de Lauretis: Although I now live and work in the United States – I have lived there for the past twenty-five years – I grew up in Italy and I went to school and university there. So, in essence, my formation is not American, nor is it only Italian at this point. It is kind of *in-between*. Nevertheless, the sense of history or the meaning of history for someone that has grown up in Italy is necessarily very different from the meaning that history would have for someone who grew up in the United States. My own sense of history now is neither one nor the other, but a combination of both.

So, what history means to me is in some ways a Marxist understanding of history, certainly a *materialist* understanding of history, perhaps closest to the Gramscian one. But my understanding of history is not strictly Marxist since it has been altered and shaped by one of the major concerns of the women's movement and of feminism, which is the concern with *subjectivity*, and therefore the notion of *social subject*, which is historical but also understood in subjective ways.

My thinking about subjectivity is also shaped by what we call film theory and feminist film theory in the United States, which is very much influenced by semiotics and psychoanalysis. For example, the issue of spectatorship, which is a primary issue for feminist film theory, is one that deals necessarily with the subjectivity of the viewer as well as with the social construction of the viewer as gendered.

In order words, I think that all of these influences that I'm trying to list – the Marxist and Italian understanding, feminism, the notion of subjectivity, the questions shaped by film theory and by gender theory – all of these things come into my understanding of history. So I would say, it's definitely a *materialist* understanding, but it is not only a sense of history as a process, say, as a class-struggle or a process in which one class opposes another, but also as a process in which subjectivity is shaped and has agency historically.

I'm not talking about subjectivity as an individual thing in the bourgeois sense of the word 'individual'. I'm talking about a subjectivity that is more related to what I call *experience*, what I'm trying to define as experience, which is precisely the effect that semiotic codes have on one's emotions and thinking and cognitive structures. So my view is an anomalous one... it is not a view that I can pinpoint in one particular area of current thought.

Although there is a group of writers whose work is known to me through a journal published in America, which is called *Feminist Issues*. For

example, critical works of **Monique Wittig** and **Christine Delphy** have been published in this journal. Anyway, they call themselves "materialist feminists". I think that's probably close to the way I've been trying to define materialism.

Is history *his* from the feminist point-of-view?

(Laughing) No, I don't think history is *his*. I think, historiography has been in the main *his*, the way history has been written has been primarily *his*. Now there are people, women, in the United States who are writing history in the sense of autobiography or personal history. That could be called *hers*-tory, but I would not want to do that. And then, of course, there is now women's history, or the history of women written by women historians, like **Linda Gordon** and **Estelle Freedman**.

NARRATION AND PERCEPTION

Hayden White regards history as a narrative. Do You see history as a *story*?

I think that between narrative and history there is a double relation. The moment you write history, you tend to describe it in narrative models. At the same time each narrative (as opposed to narrativity, which is a structure), each actual narrative is a text, verbal or written, and is always embedded in history. So it is a kind of a double relation, but not a relation of identity. It is not that history is narrative or narrative is history. I would keep the distinction. I know some people, though, who claim that history whenever written is always and necessarily narrativised. But I don't think that is the case.

For example, there are different ways of describing history, different practices of writing history: oral history, psychoanalytic history or one's own personal history etc. If one takes the notion of narrativity in a broad sense, then it is true that there is always some narrative pattern in any kind of production of speech or any discourse about history. But I don't think they are necessarily the same thing, nor do I think that the patterns are always the same.

In Your book *Alice Doesn't*² there is an essay "Desire in Narrative" in which You write about narrative as an oedipal structure. Is narrative automatically and always that kind of a fixed structure?

I don't think it *needs* to be oedipal in the sense of the full story of Oedipus, although it *tends* to be oedipal, because the Oedipus is a major historical structure of our thinking and of our understanding. Not because it has to be, but because it is. So, it is not a necessity, but it is something that does occur. The fact that it does occur doesn't mean that it is either the *only* thing that can occur or that it *always* has to occur. But often narratives inscribe de-

sire in an oedipal way, whether the narratives are filmic or spoken or whatever. That does happen.

Now, by 'oedipal' I don't mean only the story Sophocles told, that one particular kind of inscription and development. But if one takes the Oedipus as a symbolic structure, then I think that it is there very often in many forms of narrative, forms in which narrative is inscribed, in one way or another – in films or novels or possibly even critical writings.

Do You think that narrative is somehow a "natural" way of organizing meanings?

I wouldn't say it is a natural way of organizing meaning. In quotation marks, OK. It is a historical or a cultural way of doing it. I mean, what happens when we watch a non-narrative or anti-narrative film, like avant-garde films, for example? Where is the dividing between a representational and a non-representational film, like American avant-garde cinema?

Say, **Andy Warhol** as an example, or **Maya Deren**, different kinds of anti-narrative films or non-narrative films. On the other hand, you have fully narrative films, like **Alfred Hitchcock's**. But where is the distinction between them? Is there any point where you can say "Oh yes, from this moment on a film becomes narrative, before it was anti-narrative". I think it is very difficult to make that distinction.

I remember seeing a film by **Michael Snow**, who is clearly not a maker of narrative films, and nevertheless being able to read the film as having, through its imagery, a narrative. I read it as being an oedipal narrative. Not because it had a story with characters in it, but because of the way the images were organised, the sequence of the segments of the film, and so on.³ So where is the narrativity? In essence, yes, it would be in my own mind, because I read a narrative into the images. You can say that by imposing the oedipal construct on the film I narrativised it. That's right.

It seems to me, that in the very process of making meaning out of images – especially when they are images of people, but sometimes even without that – that happens. On the other hand, I wouldn't say that automatically any time we make meaning out of something it is a narrative meaning. Perhaps something happens in the process of telling, in the process of talking about something, which is similar to what **Sigmund Freud** calls *seconдарization*. That is, when you give an account of a dream, you start making sense of it by putting yourself as the subject of the dream and then you make the story.

I think that both processes – the primary processes which go through images, associations etc. in the unconscious, and the secondary processes which are very much to do with the narrative – go on at the same time. So it is not strictly a narrative that goes on. I think that both things are there. And it seems to me that the pleasure in film, visual

pleasure, is often given by things that are not in themselves narrativised. We, instead, when talking about them and telling them, narrativise and seconдарize them, to use Freud's term 'secondary revision'.

So, you sort of tell yourself what you are seeing? You could say that you re-tell it to yourself?

Yes, exactly. When you watch an avant-garde film, you not only try to find meaning in the images – maybe you do that too – but you also start focusing on your own *perception*, because that's what the film is all about. And your perception is of a different quality from narrativising. And that's why I was saying primary processes in Freudian terms, because your perception has to do with what happens to you as you keep watching the same image over and over again.

A film that I always find fascinating and very interesting precisely because it is a borderline case, a visual narrative, is a film by **Michael Snow** again, *Wavelength*, a forty-five minute zoom. It seems to me that this film is a meta-theoretical film about narrative, because the whole process of the zoom, the overall structure, is a narrative: from the moment you become aware of the movement of the camera, you want to know where it is going to get to. So, you have the beginning, you become aware of the thing is moving, you want to get there. And you do, I mean, you *do* get there, eventually. And where you end up is, first of all, in the picture of the sea, and then you end up in the sea, which means that it opens up again, all framing has disappeared. So that's a kind of narrative movement that the film has.

There are little snatches of narrative here and there; there are people walking in, answering a phone, there is somebody who walks in and falls to the floor, and so on, but your expectations are constantly frustrated, because you never find out what is happening or what's going to happen to these people.

Your overall expectation, however, is not frustrated, it is eminently satisfied, which is why the film is so pleasurable. The zoom continues, it doesn't stop, it continues and eventually gets to the end. In the meantime, as you watch your own perception when, for example, the printing changes, there you focus on pure perception. So, both pure perception and seconдарization (narrative) are there, and maybe we at some moment do more of the one or the other, but both things go on constantly in film. Even in Hollywood films!

Melodrama is, I think, an example of a film genre where the narrative is very much there but less important than visual perception. For example, the films of **Douglas Sirk**, which I go to see every time they come around, because there is such pleasure just in the movement of the camera, in the colours, the sets and so on. And I don't go for the narrative as such, but for the overall *excess*

which I'm sure is fetishistic in nature. Narrative is obviously there, but it is not the only thing that's there.

EXPERIENCE

In Your latest book *Technologies of Gender*⁴ the concept of experience seems to play a central role. Why do You think experience is interesting and important?

Because experience is the *basis* of feminism in the sense that feminism began the moment women started talking to each other about their experience in a very simple way. That is what happened to me, what I have heard, what I've been told. Out of this raw presentation of facts, of feelings on one's life, by sharing them with other women, by discussing them together, by analysing them together, one became conscious that what seemed to be purely individual experience, in fact, was shared in different ways but with very precise contents by other women. And therefore it became apparent that, for example, gender – or being a woman – was not only a purely personal or individual thing, but a *social construction*.⁵

So, experience was the beginning of a reflection, an understanding, the possibility of a critical position vis-à-vis society, vis-à-vis the social construction of individuals in gender. And then, of course, one started realizing that this experience was not just idiosyncratic, it was not just what had happened to one individual woman, but was something that was socially coded in such a way that it would happen to all other women.

So I've been trying to understand experience not simply as a raw fact, what happened, what was said, what was done, but as the way in which certain events, facts, words become meaningful for one person after, for example, repetition. That's why I used the concept of *habit* by **Chaler Peirce** in the last chapter of *Alice Doesn't* entitled "Semiotics and Experience". It is something I want to work more on and I want to work more on that in relation to psychoanalysis, to Freud, because I am convinced that there are relations between Peirce's notion of habit, which is the final interpretant, and the unconscious in Freud. In other words I think that habits can become unconscious; so that we are not aware that they are – yet they are.

When Peirce talks about the production of meaning, he articulates a very important notion – the notion of *interpretants*. It is not that one particular sign has one particular meaning, but a sign is basically already an interpretant and produces an interpretant. There is this continuous chain of interpretants, but it isn't endless, infinite. It stops in what he calls a *final* interpretant, which is a habit.

The example he gives is very simple. If I put my hand on a hot stove and I burn myself, the final meaning is registered in my senses. And so I would not put my hand on the stove again, because I've

made an association which is not so much a logical one but a physical, immediate and direct one at that point.

Nevertheless, there is a relation between the outside world, which is a hot stove, the experience of perception in my body, and the meaning which I can then construct (and explain through physics or whatever), which is that I burn, for example. This is a simple example, but it shows the relation between three things: the outside world, the inner world of the senses, and the conceptual meaning, which I can then teach: "Don't touch a hot stove because..." It is thus a piece of knowledge that I have acquired; it is a piece of cultural knowledge, which has required the mediation of my own body.

I am trying to enlarge the concept of experience to mean more than "it happened to me once", and yet I want to emphasize that events of the world acquire meaning only when they go through my subjectivity. And so the meaning of gender, the meaning of being a woman, the meaning of love – all of these things also exist as meanings for me, not only because I've read them in books, but because they have somehow gone through my body, my senses, and thus have acquired meaning for me, a meaning which is very concrete, which is directly related to what I call experience.

So that experience is a combination of the material world, the world outside, perception and intellection. I'm trying to complicate the term 'experience', because I think it is an important one. In the philosophical tradition that we have, especially in the United States, but in Europe too, the term 'experience' is too connected with raw empiricism to be understood as relating to meaning and to subjectivity. It is supposed to be the opposite of subjectivity. Yet, for me, it is not. I know it is a dangerous word like the word 'consciousness' – but I think we need to reclaim and redefine these words. I don't think we can give them up.

Could one say that cinema is an apparatus or a technology producing ideological experiences?

It seems to me that cinema as a *social technology* produces not only ideology – but forms of subjectivity. It produces forms of consciousness and also forms of subjectivity. This applies as well to the films of Douglas Sirk as to those of Michael Snow; it's not only commercial cinema that produces either ideology or subjectivity, but all kinds of cinema do. What they produce are different, obviously. And that's the point.

Avant-garde cinema is also to produce different kinds of responses of perception and, therefore, of subjectivity. It doesn't want to produce ideology but, in effect, because cinema works in the context of other social forms of representation, it cannot help doing that. I mean, you cannot have something producing pure perception. There is no such a thing, right? Also the conditions of reception and the conditions of production have something to do

with what the film can produce for the particular spectator.

So, I think that definitely cinema produces ideology, as do all sorts of other things, including language. I think, though, that the ways in which cinema produces forms of subjectivity are specific. That's why they can be studied in their specificity, which is *technological*, not only in the sense that it uses machines, but in the sense that it produces meanings in a particular way.

Think, for instance of the way in which **Michel Foucault** talks about the technology of sex⁶. Sex, he said, is something produced by a set of apparatus or technologies. Foucault doesn't even mention cinema, but he mentions all sorts of other institutional forms, like confession, the prison system, medicine, psychoanalysis and so on. These are also discursive apparatus for the construction of values, ideology and subjectivity; apparatus which as **Louis Althusser** says, interpellate or address the subject.

Some people think that commercial cinema produces ideology because it is there to make money and to entertain people. I think that's a wrong way of looking at it. The question is, to what extent different forms of cinema go *with* the grain of the dominant culture and to what extent they go *against* it. For there are different kinds of cinema, different ways of making films, different modes of distributing films and so on. That is why the whole discussion of film is so interesting: at least in the United States there are different kinds of *practices* of cinema. They are different insofar as they engage the viewer differently or produce, finally, different forms of subjectivity.

And the question of going with or against dominant culture also pertains to practices of language; written language, certainly, but also spoken language. The ways in which people speak to each other has a lot to do with the kinds of subjectivity that are produced. It's just that each of these apparatus or practices has its own specificity and they shouldn't all be lumped together, since the discourse then becomes too vague. You know, to say "Anything produces ideology". Sure, but what does that mean?

I think, what is interesting is to study how each one specifically produces the forms that it produces. And with film, I think, the interesting thing is that the question of spectatorship, the effects produced on the spectator, have been studies in relation to certain common features of film, like watching an illuminated screen in a dark auditorium, but also in relation to different forms of reception of the film, different conditions of reception.

SPECTATORSHIP AND GENDER

What do You mean by addressing the spectator as female? And what kinds of films do that?

Films that, I claim, address the spectator as female, regardless of the gender of the viewer, are films made *by women* historically in a *feminist context*. They are made by women filmmakers who are informed about feminism, and who are posing through their films particular questions which come out of feminism.

Then there are films that address women as their main audience, such as the *women's films* of the 40's, which were deliberately and commercially made to be seen by women. They addressed women by basically talking about women and telling stories about women's lives. The feminist films are addressing women in a different way.

What happens then to the women in the audience when they see these films? Let's talk about women's cinema right now. I just finished teaching an undergraduate course called "Women in cinema" during which I showed many different kinds of films: there were films made in Hollywood about women by men directors, then there were films like those by **Maya Deren**, **Germaine Dulac**, **Dorothy Arzner**, – which were made by women either outside or inside Hollywood. These were not feminist films since they were not made in the historical context of feminism. Of course I also showed films made in that context, like **Lizzie Borden's Born in Flames** made in USA, **Sally Potter's Thriller** made in England, or a German film by **Ulrike Ottinger**, *Bildnis einer Trinklerin*. And several others.

It turned out that, yes indeed, women responded to the films in very different ways, that had very much to do with their experience and position in social life: their age, their race, their sexual identity etc. I tried to show them how these films were addressing women from a feminist perspective, in other words, how the films were questioning certain forms of cinema; they were questioning the gaze, the relation of the sound to the image, and so on. And some of the women were convinced and some were not; some of them felt engaged directly as women, as feminists, whereas others did not.

To me this does not disprove my idea that these films are addressing women in a feminist perspective. But it means that there is no such thing as a feminist film that will convey the same, feminist message to everybody. That is not the case. Nevertheless, in the discussion, I think it became apparent that these films *raised issues*. For example, I showed *Thriller* right after Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* because Potter's film actually quotes *Psycho* in very specific ways. Not only with the soundtrack, but also visually.

The image of woman looking at herself in a mirror in *Thriller* is almost a direct quote from the scene in *Psycho* where the sister goes into house of the

murderer and at some point sees herself in the mirror as she is looking for her sister, who – as we know – is dead. She catches her own reflection in the mirror and for a very frightful moment she thinks it's her sister. That's the image that Thriller repeats and quotes directly, to make the point that women must be murdered for the sake of men's stories.

I showed Thriller after Psycho but some people didn't even see the connection until I brought it up – then they saw it. Other people saw the connection at once and they saw what Thriller was doing; how it was questioning the story of Psycho and the genre and the images as well.

image. Because of the second film they were able to understand their own responses to the first, which they wouldn't have done otherwise. Probably they would have come to that understanding with a lot of discussion, but the second film made the point for them visually and much more quickly.

How does a woman watch a film like *Psycho*?

Women cannot look at the screen as if they were Marion Crane. They have to look as if they were the spectator to whom the film is addressed, that is the male spectator. Because if they looked as if



Alfred Hitchcock: Psycho (1960).

So the response to the films varied according to the knowledge that the individual students had about film, as well as other factors, like their experience and social position. But in the end they all agreed that by seeing the two films together the second film made them question a lot of things in the first one, which they had previously taken for granted.

Seeing the two films together also made the students able to express their own sense of the way they had related to the figure of Marion Crane (played by Janet Leigh) who is murdered. They were able to say "Yes, the shower murder scene was gripping and I wasn't identified with her. I didn't think that woman was me." Nevertheless, at some other level they were identifying with that

they were Marion Crane, they wouldn't understand the film. See, this is the whole argument about the gaze being male!

The film is constructed with the man as the viewer and, of course, there is a man behind the camera. So, in order to watch that film, if you are a woman, you have to put yourself in that (male) position. However, you are not only in that position because – and this is the trouble – you are also in the position of Marion Crane – to some extent, at some fantasmatic level.

But it isn't that women only identify with women in film. What happens when a woman looks at Marion Crane undressing... I just leave a question there! We have a very complicated set of responses to seeing a woman undressing. They are obviously

not immediately erotic, in most cases, but they are *voyeuristic*. Our relation to the female body is, to some extent, mediated by film, and therefore it is to some extent voyeuristic, too.

In this regard, I want to speak about another film, made in America two years ago, called *Working Girls*. I heard a discussion with the director of the film, Lizzie Borden, after the film and it was very interesting. When watching the film, what I found extraordinary was the way she had managed to film women in various phases of undress, without clothes, in sexual situation and so on... and there was not a one minute when I felt uncomfortable, not one, ever.

In the discussion somebody asked her about this and she responded that she always tries to film women as if she were filming her *own* body. In other words, she tried to show the women's bodies as they would have seen themselves at that moment. If you are undressing, you see your body from a particular perspective, which is *never* the front screen-facing position. And that's what Lizzie Borden tried to do, precisely, in order to *not* make it voyeuristic. And she succeeded!

She did, I think, because of this *double-experience* that we have of our own bodies: one is the body that we live with, and inside of, the other is the one that we see in mirrors and imagine projected on a screen in a voyeuristic way. We do this because everything around us – not only movies but painting, statues, other people that go by in the street, every clothes store window and so on – promotes this double-kind of a relation that women have to women as subjects and objects of the look.

There is a famous book by **John Berger**, *Ways of Seeing*⁷, where he talks about the nude and about women looking at themselves being looked at, so that women have to imagine themselves as an object of sight. I think that is true, but that's not the only way in which we see ourselves. Because if that were the only way, then we would be fully complicit with the voyeuristic, we would see ourselves only as objects or images.

However, we also see ourselves in another way, which is quite different, from inside our body, so to speak. And that's why we have this double-perception. I believe that women's cinema, that is, feminist films that address the spectator as female, convey this double-perspective. The filmmaker tries to convey this double-way that we have, as women, of relating to our own bodies, and to the bodies of other women, as well.

There is an interesting essay about the relation of the woman to the monster in the horror film, not in the contemporary horror film but in the classical monster films like *Phantom of the Opera* and then *Peeping Tom*, for example. It is an essay by **Linda Williams**, "When the Woman Looks"⁸. In those monster films – in *Alien* as well – the relation of the woman to the monster is really one of affinity. In other words, the idea is that in looking at the monster, the woman sees aversion of herself, to some extent.



Lizzie Borden: *Working girls* (1986).

What do you mean by "feminist film"? What makes a film feminist? Is feminism in the filmic text or is it a contextual thing?

This is a question of categories. First of all, I would be very careful in calling any film a feminist film, because that is to use the term as a *category* of the film, of the text itself. I think what is feminist in a film is usually already in the *project* of the film.

I mean the way filmmaker starts thinking about the film, from the beginning, as a feminist thing: she starts thinking about the film not just as telling a story but as raising certain issues, being critical of certain problems for women in the world and of the ways in which films are made. So, feminist film is from the beginning critical, not only of the world outside, but of the cinema itself, of the codes of cinema.

Therefore the question is not only of the script but also of the funding, the production, the casting, of who is going to make and to see the film, of the distribution. These are all questions that are there in the beginning in a film that is made, say, in a feminist mode. So, it is much more than just the text itself. To make a film with these considerations is more of a project than just making an object, which will then be distributed.

For example, when Lizzie Borden made her first film *Born in Flames*, she started with the idea of making it with women only, and with the women participating in the film, contributing to the script and so on. And then the distribution: I wrote about that in detail in a chapter of *Technologies of Gender*⁹. But when she made *Working Girls*, from the beginning she wanted to make it as a commercial film, as a feature film for theatrical distribution. She said she wanted to reach a larger number of people.

What is the relation of feminist films to avant-garde films? Are feminist films avant-garde films?

To me those two categories – feminist and avant-garde films – are not commensurable. You can have a feminist film that is made, say, in avant-garde style, but also a feminist film that is not made in that way. On the other hand, you can have a lot of avant-garde films that are not made with the feminist intention. Maya Deren, for example. She didn't make films as a feminist. The way they may be read today, of course, that's a different story. That's the function of *reading*.

You said You wouldn't use 'feminist film' as a category. What do you think about the categories and labels B. Ruby Rich suggests in her article "In the Name of the Feminist Film Criticism"?¹⁰

I think the idea was good, but I don't think she succeeded. That is the only thing by Ruby Rich that I did not like very much, because I think it didn't work. The other things she writes I do like. Sure, we have no categories for looking at feminist films and talking about them, but you cannot forcefully invent a name or a label and make it stick, because a label is a code, and a code is a social event. You cannot have one person deciding it.

Sure, at some point somebody used the term 'modernist' for the first time and then other people picked it up and so it was used. But Rich's proposed terms were not picked up and used, probably because they were not effective at that moment. It is not always possible to make a new category and make it stick.

One term that has stuck is '*women's cinema*', a much better term than feminist film. It's an expression that was used in England and in the United States in the 70's, and it still continues to be used. It doesn't only mean films made by women, it means films made within a feminist context, both of production and of reception. It also means film criticism written by women, newspaper reviews and so on. And I think it continues to be meaningful, although some people don't like the term.

IDENTIFICATION AND DIFFERENCE

What would be the connection of *different* experiences of sex, race, religion etc. to the spectatorship that is produced by the film? How is it possible to talk about "spectator" or "spectator position" if there are many spectators and positions?

It's possible because the concept of spectator is a critical concept that is now established, because enough things have been written and said about it. So there is such a thing as the notion of female spectatorship, for example. And that goes back, I think, to what we were earlier saying about the way

women identify with or project themselves into the film at two different levels. One is from the place of the *camera*, the place of the look. Although we are not fully there, we are also there. The other is the place of the *image*.

There are some theorists like Mary Ann Doane¹¹ who say that women can finally only really identify with the image. Others like Laura Mulvey¹² say that women really sit at the place of the camera, that is they identify with the male gaze and the position of the male character inside the film, the subject of the look. What I'm saying is that we are in *both* those positions. Laura Mulvey, too, writes in a later article¹³ that women are both in the place of the camera and in the place of the look. Though, she is using the metaphor of the transvestite, which I think is a problem that I cannot go into here.

So, because enough people have written about it and have articulated these positions for women as spectators in relation to Hollywood cinema, classic narrative cinema, I think it is possible to talk about the notion of female spectatorship, which doesn't mean that *every* woman watching the film would be there.

As a theoretical notion it does account for some ways in which women watch films and talk about them. I'm trying to argue that a film like *Born in Flames* constructs different positions for women to be in, and the difference is the way in which the woman spectator relates to the women on the screen¹⁴. Now *Born in Flames* is not a classical Hollywood narrative, nor is *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* by Chantal Akerman. These films are precisely working with and against narrative: they work to some extent with the narrative but they also work to show the codes of narrative and to shift them.

But, as for *Born in Flames*, I've shown it in my classes on women's cinema, and Black women students said they didn't find themselves addressed at all by that film, they did not identify or see themselves in those Black women in the film. That simply shows that when you read anything, you always read from a *historical* position. The meaning something has for you has to do with your location in the social at that particular time, given your history and the place where you are, and your historical location.

However, most of the white women I've talked to, that is, friends and students in several classes, they all felt the way I do about the film. The Black women and the women of color did not, but the white did. Now the film was made in complete collaboration with the women who are actors in the film, in particular with one, Honey, who had a very strong role in it because she wrote many of the lines and, who is a black woman. So, even though the film was made by Black women working together with the white woman who directed it, a lot of the Black women spectators did not identify.

They said that those women in the film act and



Born in Flames.

talk like white women, not the way Black women would. They also said that those women look macho: they have short hair, they are dressed in fatigues or in pants, and they are supposed to be revolutionaries. And then there is a women's army and all of the Black women I've talked to said that they would never join a women's army. So they just didn't identify. They said the film was a white woman's idea about black women.

THE POINT(S) OF DISPLACEMENT – WHOSE FEMINISM?

In Your lecture¹⁵ You talked about *displacement* "as disidentification with a group, a family, a self, a "home", even a feminism, held together by the exclusions and repression that enable any ideology of the same" and You said that displacement concerns especially "one's point of understanding and conceptual articulation, which affords a redefinition of the terms of both feminist theory and social reality from a standpoint at once inside and outside their determinations". Obviously You don't see ideology as a monolithic totality in the Althusserian sense? You think that it is possible to refuse the interpellation?

During World War II there was a poster with the caption "Your country needs YOU!" which is similar to Althusser's example of the policeman shouting, "Hey, you!" But the way in which the poster was used, showed precisely that not everybody responded to the call. Some people did; they felt addressed and responded; they felt that 'you' was them. But other people took the poster and put in the bathroom, for example. Obviously, they did not respond but they knew what the poster wanted. So they understood the interpellation but they *displaced* their response.

Isn't there a difference between understanding the ideology and being interpellated by it?

Yes, but Althusser claims that everybody responds when interpellated. And I think that everybody is interpellated but not everybody responds the same way. I agree that one cannot just simply walk away and ignore the call, but at the same time, I think, we can construct *practices of resistance*, so that our response to the ideology's call is not the one that was expected.

I think that *dis-identification* has precisely to do with knowing that I am responding. It is because I know I am responding that I can direct myself in another way. That's what I tried to argue about women – feminists – being inside but also outside of ideological determination.

But the point is: you have to have, first of all, a *reason* to displace yourself. There has to be a reason why you do it. Secondly, there have to be, in the social field, *places* where you can go. You cannot just walk into a desert and become a prophet! To resist, in terms of social resistance, you have to have a place where you can go and from there look back.

An example from my classes: one of the places from which white men can critique society now is from the position of the *critique of colonial discourse*. In other words, in classes of men and women, for white women usually the point of critique, the point of displacement is feminism, at least initially. Then there are other positions, the position of race, the position of homosexuality, any position that is socially disapproved or discriminated against.

For white men, one of the positions from which they can speak and move outside ideology, is the critique of colonial discourse. That is, the understanding of the working of racist and colonialist assumptions in texts and discourses and representa-

tions (film, for example). In my option, feminism is not a position for men to displace themselves into.

A book called *Men In Feminism*¹⁶ was published in the USA some time ago, and there are very many prominent critics, both male and female, writing in it. What do You think about the issue of men and feminism?

The book *Men In Feminism* is a very good example of attempted intellectual exploitation and appropriation. However, the men-in-feminism-people have different reasons for their involvement. Feminism as a political movement has developed both as a theory and a practice of daily life. Men who have been interested in the feminist practice of daily life, I think, have been so because of their direct connections with particular women or because of connections between the women's movement and the gay liberation movement in America.

But what most male critics and theorists find interesting is feminist theory. At least some of the ideas of the feminist theory. The "male feminists" in the book keep making a distinction between feminist theory and women's studies. Women's studies or the women's movement do not interest them. But feminist theory does because it is intellectually stimulating, because it is intellectually new – one of the few areas in the American human sciences that is producing new ideas and new research. So it seems that feminism is interesting for men because it is an intellectual discourse, which is theoretically sophisticated, and which, therefore, they want to *master*. This is a generous suggestion... I could be less generous and say other things!

Do you mean that to be a feminist theorist you have to be a woman! Isn't there a danger of remaining stuck to the simplistic binary opposition between man and woman and forgetting all the other differences?

I am ambivalent about this. On the one hand I agree that you can't base everything on gender and say that men have no access to feminism. However, what makes feminism different from other theories is that it is based on understanding of *women's experience*, which is established through women talking to each other about it.

In other words, feminist consciousness is not just ideas, but an understanding and a way of thinking which is based on the historical experience of being female-gendered, of what you've grown up with. Gender is a *real* thing, although it is not biology; it is a social construction, which is just as real. It has real effects in the way people feel, think, act. And that is why I say that feminist consciousness is directly related to experience.

So, whether men can be feminists depends on

whether they can accept the knowledge that women produce and have from their experience as women. And I mean social, theoretical knowledge, not only knowledge of the personal or private sphere.

Wouldn't there be an analogous situation between, let's say, black and white women...

That's right. In other words, you have a series of differences, and there are some things in common. However, what I think is common between, say, a black and a white woman and what may be in common between a man and a woman of the same age, generation, city, class etc. are different things.

The model of identity as multiple, made of multiple components, means that there are ways of comparing, for example, a man and a woman, on some level, but that doesn't make them simply the same or simply different – it just makes one possibility of connection. Their interests continue to be different, and at times – often – in conflict. Finally, men can relate to feminism, or feminism can be useful to men, or men can work for feminism in certain ways, but not as women do.

Maybe there could be some space where you can – not from the position of woman, but from position of man criticize patriarchal discourse?

Yes, there could be, there are such spaces. But, from which position – as a man – do you criticize patriarchal discourse, given the benefits of patriarchal discourse to you? That is the question. What is your gain in criticizing patriarchal discourse? One has to have a *stake*. One must be unhappy with patriarchy so as to be able to criticize it honestly, really.

Are You saying that a man cannot be unhappy with patriarchy...?

Absolutely he can, but he has to come and tell me where and why he is unhappy with it. And do his own analysis and critique of patriarchy. Some men have done that, but not for the benefit of women.

If you put it that way, wouldn't it be almost impossible for a white, middle-class and heterosexual man to criticize or to speak in favor of anything that is not white, middle-class, heterosexual and male?

That's right. But let me go back to feminism. There are a lot of levels, of layers, in self-consciousness. An important part of feminism is the practice of *self-criticism*. First of all women said "Men are bad, women are good". So the first layer was that all women are good, and they are the same.

The second layer is that you realize that women are not all the same; then you start seeing that some women have oppressed other women socially, because of the way society is organized. It is

hard to accept that, as a white woman in the USA – not you personally but your white woman's history – is that white women have in very specific ways oppressed black women. So, the next level is to understand that.

The next level still is to understand that even if you do not hire black women to clean your house, even if you have nothing but feelings of equality – nevertheless, your very existence in a university where the majority is white is oppressive of the students of color.

There are many levels of consciousness that one can attain. What I am suggesting is that a lot of white women do not have a real stake in abolishing racism; it doesn't necessarily benefit them. So they feel guilty about the history of slavery, but they say "Well everybody is the same in the USA today", and that is obviously not true. These women don't want to look further because they don't have a reason to look further. Because they are middle-class women, they have a career. What they see is that men have a better career than they have, but they don't see that women of color have less of a chance for a career than they have.

Isn't it possible for men to look the same way?

It is not a same thing but there are analogies to be made here. In other words, the levels of consciousness for men, in relation to sexism are many. There is the immediate one: women should get the same pay, women should be treated the same... But then there are other more subtle layers that have to do with expectations, with making space for people, with who speaks in a conversation, who competes for jobs etc. And also, many women would say, women are *not* the same as men. We don't want to be treated like men.

In short, there are a lot of layers of consciousness that men can go through in relation to women. Some men have gone through several layers, others through none or very few. But it isn't that simple that one begins to think about it and says "Yes, men and women should be equal", and becomes a feminist. It is also not simple for women. And it is a continuing process.

I am not saying it is impossible for men, but I am saying that people have to realize and to be aware of what stake they have in feminism. What they stand to gain. For example, I realize that I stand to gain if black women are not oppressed as black; I stand to gain because I will live in a better world. Because whenever they are oppressed, their oppression also defines my life.

I think it is important to ask oneself, man or woman, what is at stake in being a feminist, what the gains are and also what the *costs* are. For clearly, there will be costs for men. So think carefully and honestly.

Notes:

* Edited from tape by Anu Koivunen.

1. On behalf of *Lähikuva*: Tuuke Alitalo, Simo Alitalo, Veijo Hietala, Anu Koivunen, Martti Lahti, Jukka Sihvonen and Putte Wilhelmsson.

2. **Teresa de Lauretis**, *Alice Doesn't. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Macmillan: London, 1984. "Desire in Narrative" pp. 103–157.

3. See the chapter in *Alice Doesn't* entitled "Snow on the Oedipal Stage".

4. **Teresa de Lauretis**, *Technologies of Gender. Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1987.

5. *Ibid.*, "Technology of Gender" pp. 1–30.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 127–146. See **Michel Foucault**, *The History of Sexuality*. Volume 1: An Introduction. Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1984. *Passim*.

7. **John Berger**, *Ways of Seeing*. BBC & Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1972.

8. *Re-vision. Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Eds. **Mary Ann Doane**, **Patricia Mellencamp** & **Linda Williams**. University Publications of America and the American Film Institute, Frederick, Md, 1984, pp. 83–99.

9. "Rethinking Women's Cinema. Aesthetics and Feminist Theory" in *Technologies of Gender*, pp. 136–146.

10. *Jump Cut. Hollywood, Politics and Counter Cinema*. Ed. **Peter Steven**. Between the Lines: Toronto, 1985, pp. 209–230.

11. **Mary Ann Doane**, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator", *Screen*. Vol. 23/3–4, Sept–Oct 1982, pp. 74–87.

12. **Laura Mulvey**, "Visuaalinen mielihyvä ja keronnallinen elokuva", *Synteesi*, 1–2/1985, pp. 5–15.

13. **Laura Mulvey**, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by 'Duel in the Sun' (King Vidor, 1946)", *Framework* No. 15/16/17 (1981).

14. "Rethinking Women's Cinema, Aesthetics and Feminist Theory" in *Technologies of Gender*, pp. 136–146.

15. "The Eccentric Subject", lecture in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Turku (May 1988), published in *Vanhasta uuteen: kynnys vai kuilu? Tekstien välisistä suhteista/ Texts on Intertextuality*. Eds. **Pirjo Ahokas** ja **Veijo Hietala**. Turun Yliopisto, Taiteiden tutkimuksen laitos. Sarja A. N:o 16, 1988.

16. *Men In Feminism*. Ed. **Alice Jardine** & **Paul Smith**. Methuen, New York, 1987.