

Teaching Guide

I began thinking about writing this book when I could not find a suitable textbook for a Women and Film course. As I reviewed the literature, I discovered a theory vacuum, a situation of “feminist film theory without women’s films.” *Cinematic Howling*’s main goal is to open up new academic dialogues concerning women’s cinema, but it is also constructed with undergraduate education in mind. Although they do not always follow chronological order, the chapters are structured to explore the change in feminist film theory over five decades, highlighting major paradigmatic shifts so that the book can be used as a textbook for such courses as Women in Film and Feminist Film Theory. A schematic summary of the book is presented in the table.

| Chapter number | Topics | Course structure | Associated theorists |
|----------------|---|--|--|
| 1 | Postfeminist discourse | Making feminist film theory relevant | Tania Modleski |
| 2 | Psychoanalysis and textual negotiations | An introduction to some basic terminology for feminist spectatorship and textual/cultural politics | Laura Mulvey, Valerie Walkerdine, and Christine Gledhill |
| 3 | Auteurism | A critical practice that supports women’s artistic expression | Pauline Kael |
| 4 | Beyond psychoanalysis | Re-evaluating the psychoanalytic foundation of feminist film theory through Louise Kaplan’s adolescent psychology | Mary Ann Doane and Louise Kaplan |
| 5 | Complex systems theory | The shift from psychoanalytic to complex systems thinking | Jeanette Winterson and Donna Haraway |
| 6 | Cultural interaction and diaspora | Complex systems thinking used to discuss issues raised in current cultural studies | Gwendolyn Audrey Foster |
| 7 | Reality and representation | Re-evaluating the issue of political correctness: the shift from art as representation to art as complex systems modelling | Hélène Cixous |
| 8 | Social activism and filmmaking | Systems practice in documentary filmmaking | Jackie Stacey |
| 9 | Existentialism and the theory vacuum | Feminist films as cultural rehabilitation: a constructivist conclusion | Maggie Humm |

In the book, I do not presume to present a comprehensive overview of feminist film scholarship; instead, I look into some key concepts in feminist film theory, synthesizing them for a women's film theory that endorses women's films. As Teresa de Lauretis points out, feminist theory is "a developing theory of the female-embodied social subject that is based on its specific, emergent, and conflictual history."¹ Throughout *Cinematic Howling*, I avoid giving any essentialist argument concerning the nature of women's film or feminist aesthetics. Instead, I try to examine every piece of work for its specific emergent properties and social-political tension. As well, I resist the general practice of using a theoretical framework to analyze film texts. In my critical practice, I observe art in theory as well as theory in art; thus, "women's films and women's film theories" are treated as interdependent subjects rather than hierarchical entities. This practice has pedagogical benefits: it allows the book to demonstrate an open-ended model through which students can learn the theories and, at the same time, cultivate their own perception of what is important and original.

An instructor can easily create a twelve-week course by adding three more weeks of material to the book's nine chapters. Many of these can be read independently, so an instructor can change their order to suit individual preferences, teaching context, and ongoing developments in feminist film theory. In certain chapters, the film is discussed in such detail that students can easily gain an understanding of its key points; thus, an instructor need not always show the film exemplified in each chapter.

Following are two possible course syllabi: the first emphasizes women's film art; the second focuses on feminist film theory:

WOMEN AND FILM, SAMPLE COURSE OUTLINE 1

| Week | Topics and readings from <i>Cinematic Howling</i> | Screenings |
|------|--|--|
| 1 | Chapter 1 Introduction | <i>Orlando</i> (Sally Potter) |
| 2 | Chapter 2 Howling for Multitudes | <i>The Company of Wolves</i> (Neil Jordan) |
| 3 | Chapter 3 Authorship | <i>Hiroshima mon amour</i> (Alain Resnais) |



| Week | Topics and readings from <i>Cinematic Howling</i> | Screenings |
|------|--|---|
| 4 | Chapter 4 Visual Pleasure | Selected avant-garde shorts <i>Meshes of the Afternoon</i> (Maya Deren) <i>Rat Life and Diet in North America</i> (Joyce Wieland) <i>Body Beautiful</i> (Ngozi Onwurah) <i>À ma soeur!</i> (Catherine Breillat) |
| 5 | | |
| 6 | Chapter 5 | <i>Boys Don't Cry</i> (Kimberly Peirce) |
| 7 | Survival | <i>Lost and Delirious</i> (Léa Pool) |
| 8 | Chapter 6 Culture | <i>The Goddess of 1967</i> (Clara Law) |
| 9 | Chapter 7 Representation | <i>Sans toit ni loi</i> (Agnès Varda) |
| 10 | Chapter 8 | <i>Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance</i> (Alanis Obomsawin) |
| 11 | Reality and Beyond | <i>Fire</i> (Deepa Mehta) |
| 12 | Chapter 9 Magic Realism | <i>Antonia</i> (Marleen Gorris) |

WOMEN AND FILM, SAMPLE COURSE OUTLINE 2

| Week | Topics and readings from <i>Cinematic Howling</i> | Screenings |
|------|--|---|
| 1 | Chapter 1 Feminist Film Theory in a "Postfeminist" World | <i>Mulan</i> (Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft) |
| 2 | Chapter 3 The Auteur Theory | <i>Hiroshima mon amour</i> (Alain Resnais) |
| 3 | Chapter 4 Cine-psychoanalysis | <i>Rear Window</i> (Alfred Hitchcock) |
| 4 | Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" | <i>Riddles of the Sphinx</i> (Laura Mulvey) |
| 5 | Doane, "Film and the Masquerade" | <i>Female Perversions</i> (Susan Streitfeld) |
| 6 | Chapter 2 | <i>The Company of Wolves</i> (Neil Jordan) |
| 7 | Chapter 6 Cultural-Textual Negotiations | <i>The Goddess of 1967</i> (Clara Law) |
| 8 | hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze" | <i>Daughters of the Dust</i> (Julie Dash) |
| 9 | Chapter 5 Complex Systems Theory | <i>Lost and Delirious</i> (Léa Pool) |
| 10 | Chapter 8 Chapter 7 Reality, Fantasy, and | Selected documentaries <i>The Lost Garden</i> (Marquise Lepage) <i>How Can We Love You?</i> (Laura Sky) |
| 11 | Feminist Expressions | <i>Herstory of Porn</i> (Annie Sprinkle) |
| 12 | Chapter 9 Not Just Oppositional: A Conclusion | <i>Antonia</i> (Marleen Gorris) |

WRITING A RESPONSE PAPER

One danger of teaching critical theory lies in what I call the “fast-food” syndrome: upon learning about this or that critical approach, students synthesize and apply it to their studies without really exploring its poetic/political nuances.

Student: I want to write an essay on Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*. (I want a Big Mac to go, please.)

Professor: What approach would you take? (Do you want the meal deal?)

Student: I kind of like Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze. (Sure, the Big Mac meal.)

Professor: Didn’t Mulvey write about *Rear Window* at the end of “Visual Pleasure”? What’s your take? (Supersize it?)

Student: I think Mary Ann Doane’s idea of the masquerade can be used to look at Lisa’s character. (OK.)

Fast food is unhealthy; when theory is treated like fast food, it can damage students’ own passion and excitement for the film art.

Since feminism advocates that the personal is political, a feminist classroom is the perfect place to cure the fast-food syndrome. We can rediscover the arts as a resource for intellectual and personal growth while practising a feminist pedagogy. Therefore, I have students complete a “Response Paper” assignment as well as the usual essay. This assignment is theoretically inspired by the Readers’ Response Theory. The following guidelines have been revised through years of trial.

Choose a film from the supplementary film list of this course to write a response paper.² In the paper, share your thoughts and recognitions through your viewing experience.

- 1 For your intended audience, imagine a trustworthy reader who believes that your ideas matter. All papers will be treated as confidential documents.
- 2 Assume that your reader has seen the film; therefore, avoid unnecessary plot summaries, character sketches, and so on.
- 3 Elaborate your personal experience as relevant to the film.
- 4 Brainstorm thoughts, memories, feelings, and images that the film triggers. Explore those fragments as trace elements of a greater understanding.

- 5 Share your most significant idea(s). Raise specific social, cultural, philosophical, or personal issues surrounding those ideas.
- 6 Readings and theories discussed in the course may be used as contrasting or supportive materials.

NOTES

- 1 Teresa de Lauretis, "Upping the Anti in Feminist Theory," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1995), 89.
- 2 Compiled by the instructor, the supplementary film list is an inventory of films not screened in class. Students may also suggest alternatives.

FURTHER READINGS

- Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey. *Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997.
- Humm, Maggie. *Feminism and Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.
- Lauretis, Teresa de. "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory." In *The Technology of Gender*, 127-48. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Levitin, Jacqueline, Judith Plessis, and Valerie Raoul, eds. *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003.
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- Rich, B. Ruby. *Chick Flicks: Theories and Movements of the Feminist Film Movement*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Smelik, Anneke. *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.
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