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Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy edited by Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti

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7. An intriguing aside is that Calvino had obviously planned on writing at least six memos; in the English edition the frontispiece is a photocopy of the six titles. A coincidental irony is that the title of the sixth memo he never completed, “Consistency,” is barely visible. Given Calvino’s penchant for playing games with his reader, perhaps one need not read Calvino’s thoughts on this “value”; being the archisuperreader Calvino envisioned, s/he could surely recognize, to borrow from Calvino himself, “the potentialities within [his] system of signs” (The Uses of Literature 16).


9. Lyotard 81. Lest we forget what we have already seen above, in Calvino’s “Levels of Reality in Literature”: “literature does not recognize Reality as such, but only levels.”

10. Lyotard 81; his emphasis.

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**Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy**

Ed. by Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti

*Foreword by Laura Mulvey*

New York: Routledge, 1988

The dissemination of English-language translations of Italian critical theory has been lamentably slow. *Off Screen* helps to speed that process for some of the contemporary film criticism produced by Italian women. Bruno and Nadotti’s project “stems from the desire to examine aspects of Italian thought and make them known to a broader audience in an attempt to stimulate deeper and more permanent cultural exchange” (2). The book results from two conferences organized to examine women’s contributions to film practice and theory in Italy and the United States. The editors point out differences and similarities in the development of women’s cinema studies in the two countries, specifying that no Italian entity has power equal to that of American feminist studies, which are now autonomous disciplines in most major U. S. universities. However, after the societal upheaval of 1968, many “gruppi dell’inconsincio” and other psychoanalytically oriented research/interest associations formed to study women’s issues. As a consequence, the editors point out, while Lacanian thought is privileged in the United States, in Italy it is the Freudian tradition that holds sway. Semiotics and poststructuralism form important bases for feminist film theory in both nations.

All of the contributors to this volume are active in charting directions for Italian thought and filmmaking. The writers of the first part of the book largely influenced the “150 Hours Courses,” a continuing-education project organized in cooperation with industry in Milan. The script of the film resulting from that project, *Scuola senza fine*, and a description of the experiences of women involved, appear in this volume. Paola Melchiori explores the uniquely female experience of the cinema—which often co-opts the male look and the feminine “dream of total fusion”—through the study of theorists such as Kierkegaard and Freud. Giulia Alberti conducts an excellent examination of the process whereby cinema fascinates woman as spectator/subject by studying fifteen-minute cropped segments of movies selected from the traditions of classical Hollywood, French *nouvelle vague*, and women directors’ films. Lea Melandri attempts to clarify the dream of love by means of an approach different from that of theorists such as Kristeva and Irigaray. As the editors note, she “articulates her own discourse through
that of another woman. . . . [Sibilla] Aleramo's writing takes on the function of subtext, to be read and rewritten at the same time, in a symbiotic process which goes beyond quotation" (24). In so doing, Melandri adroitly evades the parasitic relationship that could result from an unskilled application of her chosen method.

The second part of the book, "Criticism: Theory/Practice," includes important articles by Giovanna Grignaffini, Lucilla Albano, and Patrizia Violi. Grignaffini addresses the question of woman's identity as portrayed in Italian movies of the 1950s, with references to thinkers such as Foucault, Barthes, and Metz; her research spans many years and several projects. Albano's insightful analysis of Welles' The Lady from Shanghai draws on Freudian interpretations in Matte Bianco's The Unconscious as Infinite Sets (1975) and also discusses technical aspects of the film, including camera style and editing. Violi's challenging, far-ranging study of semiotics and the female subject analyzes new dimensions of the theories of Benveniste, Eco, and others. Her work touches upon issues that Teresa de Lauretis' Alice Doesn't (Indiana University Press, 1982) brought forcefully to the awareness of the American critical establishement. The de Lauretis chapter on "Desire in Narrative" focused on the message of words chosen by authors; Violi accuses the language system itself of marginalizing woman as "the other," and exhorts women to refuse either to be forced into silence, or to be drawn in by the dream of love and identification with phallocentricity. She calls for a reconsideration of the problem of language "at the theoretical level, where the category of female subject can be approached" (148).

The book finishes with a section on film production. Annabella Miscuglio's brilliantly woven essay tells outsiders the "inside story" of women's struggles to play an active, intelligent role in Italian cinema. Also included is an extremely useful filmography of women in Italian film, compiled by the editors, which boasts photos and rare stills from early movies, and collects invaluable information in a readily accessible manner. Miscuglio's "affectionate and irreverent account of eighty years of women's cinema in Italy" discusses the socio-political atmosphere and obstacles that Italian women film directors had to overcome, starting in 1906 with Elvira Notari and proceeding to the present day.

The contributions to Off Screen provide lucid, insightful commentaries on feminist film theory and the condition of women in contemporary Italy. The translations from the original Italian generally read quite smoothly, but there are occasional lapses: "emptiness aspires to be filled, that what is opaque seeks the clarity of understanding" (59, italics added). However, the minor mistakes in no way undermine the power of the theories presented. Throughout the collection, filmic study is equated with woman's self-examination: "the person analysing and reading the filmic text is, at the same time, read and worked through, in a theoretical-clinical process. The female subject, recognizing herself as such, casts upon her object a look off screen, a look of presence and absence, internal and external, allusive and pregnant as the off screen space is" (12).

Bruno and Nadotti have assembled an important work whose conceptual nucleus emanates from the very question of what is specifically female. Although many different issues are raised, one theme is common to all of the essays. As Laura Mulvey asserts in her foreword, the dream of love "offers a starting-point for understanding woman's complicity with her oppression and the force of the marginalized
popular culture directed specifically at
women. . . By analyzing the problems
raised by female pleasure, rather
than by repressing or refusing to ac-
knowledge its existence, it may be pos-
sible to transform or deflect it” (xii).
These essays compare favorably with
the chapters on “Polemics” and
“Feminist Film Theory” in Women and
the Cinema, edited by Karyn Kay and
Gerald Peary (Dutton, 1977). They also
expand upon complex issues, such as
the reification of women in cinema,
raised by Patrizia Carrano in Malafem-
mina: La donna nel cinema italiano
(Guaraldi, 1977). Off Screen belongs in
the library of anyone interested in film
theory, particularly as created by Italian
women in response to their experience
of the cinema.

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Something French seeps through the
editing and presentation of “Contem-
porary Italian Thought” in SubStance
53—until one gets to the articles, which
have a wonderful way of “speaking”
to each other, as immigrants in foreign
spaces, telling of the distance in shar-
ing “that” language.

“That” language comes through in
the affinities between the articles of
Vattimo/Cacciari (9,72), Agamben/Rella
(23,32), Cacciari/Agamben (68,23), Vat-
timo/Agamben (17,23), Rella/Cacciari
(35,71), and Rella/Vattimo (29,11).
These examples, which I will return to,
make up a strategy of an Italian cultural
discourse which is a form of “reconcili-
ation,” though without establishing,
settling, or accepting. Keala Jane
Jewell’s Introduction (5-6) rushes to
quote Cacciari on a “form of political
thought which would not be based on
the model of reconciliation,” and al-


allows this to typify Italian cultural dis-
course, adding that it also “might be
read in conjunction with the articles” (6,
my emphasis). Well, at least for these
particular articles, the “might” of non-
reconciliation is still stronger than
should be used for the reading of the
articles.

It is appropriate to begin with the
article by Jewell—“Pasolini: Decon-
structing the Roman Palimpsest”—since
she introduced the selections and
translated three articles from the Italian.
Jewell’s article harbors a difference in
that it does not participate in the “value
of the residual” it wishes to present:
the palimpsest. Representing the poems
of Pasolini as palimpsests is visually
thought provoking; yet “deconstruct-
ing” them has little to do with those
delicate surfaces, unsolidified at the
slightest touch of language’s rougher
games. When the “contaminatio” has
entered poet and polemicist, it has also
trespassed the person, and it becomes
that twisting reflection of the “more
human” than human which seeks to
recoil its surface from the winds of tex-
tuality. Textuality is the horrid realism
of conceptual capture, and it was
against this that a “residual” was
hoped for, a residual which is under-
stood in Passione e ideologia, and felt in
the Friulan lyric verses. Jewell’s article
is nonetheless well documented, while
engaged in a “view from afar” of the
leavings of a lived peripherality.

Beverly Allen’s “The Telos, Trope
and Topos of Italian Terrorism” “textu-
alizes” its subject as a high powered rifle
magnified by its scope. Yet such magni-
fication does not distinguish the “differ-
ces” objectified by its own viewing,
and renders different things equally