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

Lorraine Lawton

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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 *arch/superreader* Calvino envisioned, s/he could surely recognize, to borrow from Calvino himself, "the potentialities within [his] system of signs" (*The Uses of Literature* 16).

8. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi with a foreword by Frederic Jameson (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984), xxiv

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.

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'inconscio" 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 Blanco'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 establishment. 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 phallogentricity. 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 acknowledge its existence, it may be possible 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 *Malafemmina: 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.

LORRAINE LAWTON
Purdue University

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Something French seeps through the editing and presentation of "Contemporary 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 sharing "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), Vattimo/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 allows this to typify Italian cultural discourse, 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: Deconstructing 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 "deconstructing" 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 textuality. Textuality is the horrid realism of conceptual capture, and it was against this that a "residual" was hoped for, a residual which is understood 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 periphery.

Beverly Allen's "The Telos, Trope and Topos of Italian Terrorism" "textualizes" its subject as a high powered rifle magnified by its scope. Yet such magnification does not distinguish the "differences" objectified by its own viewing, and renders different things equally