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PRESERVATION
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122 tive attitudes to Hollywood, in particular modern Hollywood, as contrasted to tasks inherent in *Screen's* problematic. Broadly speaking, in the former journals, classical Hollywood provides the critical and aesthetic standard against which to measure new Hollywood films. I think it is fair to say that for both magazines the phenomenon of 'New Hollywood Cinema' is regretted. Its films rarely come up to the standard (though this standard is formulated in different ways in the two journals). *Screen's* relationship to classical Hollywood has been different. It has sought to theorise the ideological operations of the classical text. It has also sought, as has other work that shares its problematic, to detect progressive texts, texts which operate in some way to undermine the ideological functioning of the classical film. Hence the work on films by Sirk, Tashlin, Arzner, Tourneur and others. This work has, of necessity, been based on theories of the operations of the classical text. The changes that can be detected in the contemporary Hollywood film would indicate that, if this kind of work is to continue, it is necessary to theorise its operations. Its rules and meanings, and hence its gaps and spaces, must be understood before any fracturing of those rules and meanings can be detected. Some strategies seem now to be difficult to pursue. For instance, Claire Johnston's thesis in *Notes on Women's Cinema* that female stereotyping in the classical text allows those stereotypes to be played off against each other in a process of rupture, of 'making strange' patriarchal structures (notably in the work of Arzner), is a thesis which cannot apply to much of modern Hollywood, since many modern Hollywood texts, in seeking to produce an effect of realist characterisation in female roles, refuse the earlier conventions of stereotyping, often in a very conscious way (see, for instance, Christine Geraghty's article on *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* in *Movie* 22). On the other hand, narrative fragmentation and ellipsis may permit the engendering of unresolved contradictions or, as in *Night Moves*, the acknowledgement within the dominant discourse of some kind of limits to its access to truth.

STEVE NEALE

'Exploitation' films and feminism

The 'exploitation' film is essentially a commercial category, a market term for those films produced at minimum cost for maximum return which take up, 'exploit' the success of other films – replaying the themes, star-stereotypes and genres of more lavish, up-market productions. They are made with specific markets in mind, hence the development of 'sexploitation' and 'blaxploitation' categories referring to the capture of the soft-core pornography film audience and black youth audience respectively. The limits of

the category are hard to place. For the purpose of the present argument the term is used to designate Hollywood 'trash movies' generally (until recently that is) considered unworthy of serious critical attention because they are low-budget 'B' features made quickly and cheaply in order to make as much money as possible. 123

Exploitation films present serious problems for feminists. They have generally been seen as produced exclusively by men for the male market. Whether or no this is true in a simple empirical sense, they depend for their financial success on an overtly coded, fetishised image of woman as sexual object: a stereotype always strenuously opposed by the women's movement in its desire to destroy old patriarchal myths and replace them with new images of women as active subjects in society and history. One of the symptoms of this desire to throw off the forms and language of the dominant ideology has led to the rejection of the stereotypes and codes of Hollywood cinema in favour of the alternative language of realism: that is, the representation of women in the 'reality' of their oppression, replacing the manipulative, false patriarchal ideology with the 'true' ideology of feminism in an attempt to rediscover the voice of women lost beneath the solidified surface of the stereotype. Recently, however, a body of work emerging from the Marxist-Feminist current in the women's movement, manifested in a growing interest in the re-reading of Freud by Lacan, has raised the problem of language in a different way, questioning the possibility of direct expression and insisting on the contradictory relationship between the language of the dominant class and that of oppressed groups. In so far as any stereotype represents the attempt by the dominant class to produce a universal popular language, equally valid for everyone, it is a political fact, and the desire to struggle with it marks the wish to change from the old to the new: to subject the timeless 'Truth' to the process of history. If we attempt to deny the reality of the stereotype, to bypass the forms of the language of the dominant class, we place ourselves outside the historical struggle in the realms of the ideal world of narcissistic identification.

Until recently feminist film-making in this country has relied heavily on the techniques of direct realism in its attempt to establish an alternative feminist language of film. Interview material predominates, reinforced with synchronised sound which appears to emanate naturally from the image. The oppression of women appears as a self-evident 'truth' which the viewer can only accept or reject because he or she is not involved in the process of criticism and analysis at the point of consumption of the film.

The Amazing Equal Pay Show (London Women's Film Group, 1974), a film made politically (ie collectively, with great difficulty, outside the dominant system of production) by a group of women film-makers who are concerned to make a radical intervention in the forms of dominant cinema, marks an important break in the

124 theory and practice of feminist film-making in that it not only refuses the notion that it is possible to counteract the representation of women in male-dominated systems of production by simply replacing it with films made from the 'women's viewpoint', it challenges the whole idea of 'women's viewpoint' as pure feminist discourse, or coherent world-view. It prefers to present itself in a mixture of conflicting forms (eg documentary realism v stereotypes, narrative continuity v didactic episodes) which attempt to break up the coherence of the forms of the dominant ideology, thus 'creating trouble' among those forms. The film becomes part of a process of learning and struggle towards feminist consciousness rather than assuming the feminist position as given, a 'truth' which can simply be set against the 'falsity' of the dominant ideology.

It is in the context of struggle, of the uneven development of political consciousness that women can recognise the necessity to work on many levels at once in our desire to create a feminist film culture. *The Amazing Equal Pay Show* makes an important intervention for a relatively small (hopefully increasing) number of people. An important part of its polemic is its mode of distribution: through alternative channels to those offered by commercial cinema, though still remaining within the capitalist mode of production in so far as it determines film as a commodity possessing exchange value and governed by the laws of the market. Distribution of the film is backed up by discussion between film-makers and audience. In this way the relationship of the audience to the film is constantly shifted and disturbed to allow for criticism and analysis in the process of consciousness-raising.

The struggle for alternative modes of production and distribution by feminist film-makers is a crucial priority for feminist politics. What still remains, however, is the problem of a much wider audience for which commercial cinema is the main diet. In spite of changes (eg the break-up of the Hollywood studio system and the growth of smaller independent production companies, or the development of alternative production and distribution channels under the impact of a 16 mm technology in the States) the capitalist mode of production is still dominant, and continues to assert itself as universally valid for everyone through the forms it uses (narrative coherence, stereotypes, genre conventions), forms which are naturalised and effaced in mainstream Hollywood cinema, but which perpetuate the same myths nevertheless. While it is clear that these naturalised forms may be less offensive to women than the blatant use of the forms of the exploitation film in *Truck Stop Women* (Mark Lester 1974) or *Caged Heat* (Jonathan Demme 1974), it is also clear that naturalised forms represent an attempt to efface and suppress contradictions, whereas the overt manipulation of stereotypes and genre conventions allows us to see that language is at work: myths are revealed as ideological structures

embedded in form itself. In fact, exploitation films are potentially less offensive than mainstream Hollywood cinema precisely because of their resistance to the 'natural', and the way they offer the possibility of taking a critical distance on the metalanguage of mainstream cinema. This has been the basis of the interest taken by avant-garde film critics in the radical potential of those 'trash' movies which attempt to utilise the basically conservative conventions of the exploitation film. 125

Stephanie Rothman is a woman film-maker who makes films specifically for the exploitation market. Her films are widely shown in women's film festivals for their feminist interest, and yet they are perhaps the most difficult of any women's films to justify in terms of feminism, relying as they do on the codes and conventions of soft-core exploitation genres. The production conditions for Rothman's films could hardly be more capitalist and patriarchal. After graduating from the University of Southern California where she followed the programme in cinema, she obtained a Director's Guild of America directing fellowship and seems to have moved straight into working as assistant to Roger Corman, veteran Hollywood director and producer of small-budget 'B' features costing between \$200,000 and \$300,000 and generally shot in a matter of weeks. Many young film-makers were given their first directorial assignments by Corman as head of American International Pictures in the 1960's and later as president of New World Productions which he started in 1971. Both AIP and New World are interested in film as a purely commercial product, as entertainment intended to reach and capture the widest audience possible. AIP has now become the major production company for exploitation films, and together with New World Productions the most consistently commercially successful. All accounts of New World Productions stress the father-figure of Corman, exerting a major influence in production values, while allowing his protégés a large amount of directorial control. The stress on film as commodity, the need to produce films as quickly and cheaply as possible has led to the exclusion in exploitation films of those production values which give mainstream Hollywood cinema its continuity: star actors, psychological realism and narrative complexity. The hall-marks of 'trash movies' are bad acting, crude stereotypes and schematic narrative: it is precisely these elements which give the exploitation film its subversive potential. Corman is an exploitation merchant with leanings towards alternative culture, and it is for this reason that his films have something of a reputation for the way they allow a voice to repressed anti-authoritarian cultural forces. (Paul Willemen has indicated some of Corman's authorial concerns in the Edinburgh Film Festival 1970 book *Roger Corman: the Millenic Vision*.)

In fact, New World Productions has something of a reputation as a 'feminist' company because of its consistent use of the stereotype of the aggressive positive heroine obsessed with revenge – a

126 feature Corman explains in commercial terms: the films which did best for New World were those in which the women decided their own destinies, and the super-assertive woman figure was developed as a response to a market demand. The positive-heroine stereotype is a common feature of New World films, often with a modern backdrop of an Asian or South American country in which a 'revolution' is taking place. The aggressive heroine turns her aggression against the male world by parodying male violence, often raping, sometimes devouring her male victims. Guns, usually machine-guns are a common accessory for the New World woman.

The positive-heroine figure as developed here is based on the idea of putting the woman in the man's place. The woman takes on male characteristics, uses male language, male weapons. In their film *Penthesilea* (1974) Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen show how this image rests on the age-old myth of woman as Amazon queen, a warlike and destructive figure created in man's image, set apart from ordinary women and desirable only in death. *Penthesilea's* death symbolises the suppression of female desires at the moment of the institution of patriarchy: the erotic force of the image lies in the threat inherent in it that those desires will once again rise to the surface, and the female will take the place of the male. Thus while the positive-heroine stereotype rests on the possibility of woman becoming the subject rather than the object of desire, that desire is seen totally in terms of male phantasies and obsessions.

Nevertheless, the aggressive-heroine stereotype contains within it the idea of revenge, of turning the weapons of the enemy against him, an idea which is basic to the polemic of feminist cinema (see for instance Nelly Kaplan's films *La Fiancée du Pirate* and *Papa les Petits Bateaux* in which the heroines use the images bestowed upon them by their oppressors to destroy them). If the films of Stephanie Rothman are to mean anything to feminists it must be in terms of the ways in which they manipulate the stereotypes and codes of the exploitation genres to create new meanings for women.

Rothman has always worked closely with Corman, within the constraints of the New World genres. In 1970 she wrote and directed the first of his 'nurse' films, *Student Nurses*, followed by the horror fantasy *The Velvet Vampire* in 1971, *Group Marriage*, a comedy, in 1972 and in 1973 the 'action' film *Terminal Island* (UK title *Knucklemen*), all financed by Corman. She and her husband/partner Charles Swartz now have their own company – Dimension Films. While all these films contain the elements required by the exploitation market, there is enough evidence to suggest that Rothman has interests of her own. In *Student Nurses*, for instance, the four female protagonists each have a distinct stereotype-image, accompanied in each case by a certain style of film-making usually associated with that image. The structure of the narrative is episodic, and the playing off of the different styles

against each other has the effect of parodying those styles and the accompanying stereotypes. The inclusion of an abortion scene also introduces a jarring note into the film. In *Terminal Island* a complex pattern of formal reversals echoes the central theme of revenge, and the film contains overt parodies of other genres: eg the Western and the Bike movie. *Terminal Island* begins with the stereotype of the aggressive positive woman; in the progress of the narrative the protagonists fight to establish a Utopian society, initiated by the women, and the narrative closes with the stereotype of woman as mother presiding over their Utopia.

Any argument about the differences between Rothman's films and other films in the exploitation field must ultimately be sorted out by close analysis of the films themselves. Nevertheless, her films have a polemical value in relation to feminist film criticism: while they cannot in any sense be described as feminist films, they work on the forms of the exploitation genres to produce contradictions, shifts in meaning which disturb the patriarchal myths of women on which the exploitation film itself rests. It is this strategy of displacement, of struggle within the forms of the film, which is of vital use to us in our struggle to find our own language, rather than the attempt to express our oppression in a coherent feminist metalanguage.

PAM COOK

The SEFT Weekend Schools

Having entered a second year, the SEFT weekend schools seem to have become an established and regularised quarterly event, and the appearance in April of a programme planned till December seems to indicate a growing commitment among the organisers to the schools as an institution. This commitment is entirely welcome since the schools are a Good Thing, but it may be useful to reflect on the story so far, as a way of focussing some of the difficulties which have already been recognised, and in the hope that continuing analysis of form and function will prevent the schools from going the way of other institutionalised Good Things. Criticism may be made redundant by the series to come, but it seems appropriate now, particularly since the last school, on teaching *The Searchers*, brought together a number of difficulties and confronted a number of criticisms which had previously been made.

Inevitably, the central questions seem to concern function and audience: what are the schools for, and who are they for? The comforting response to such questions is that the schools are a contribution to the development of a film culture within the specific context of the *Screen/Screen Education* project, but while this is an acceptable general formulation, there is also the feeling that the