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# Film – A Feminine Dream Factory *

"At this point in time a strategy should be developed which embraces both the notion of films as a political tool and film as entertainment. For too long these have been regarded as two opposing poles with little common ground. In order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working thrugh of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film." (Claire Johnston, 1973)[1]

"I look into your eyes and all I see are trashy day-dreams," Connie's mother tells her in *Smooth Talk* (Joyce Chopra, USA, 1986).

The issue of representation has been fundamental for the modern feminist movement. While equality, especially in relation to equal pay and equal opportunity, continued to be a fundamental objective of women activists, what marked the re-emergence of feminism as a political and social movement from the late 1960's in the West was a new articulation of the contradictions of femininity, of motherhood and gender for women together with a new analysis of the conditions – social as well as economic – producing these contradictions. Central to this new analysis was an emphasis on the role of the production and circulation of images of women which not only exploited women – for example the use of a woman and her usually unclothed body to sell cars, etc – but also which produced definitions of women and femininity that were presented as true, timeless, and hence natural. Woman 's image, it was argued, was used to represent woman as mother, virgin, whore, or just image. She was a sign of everything and anything but herself. In the demand for a true representation, and in challenging existing definitions of women, however, feminists confronted the problem of how to define positive or correct images as opposed to negative and oppressive images of women. We were thus forced to examine the construction of images as such and the way meanings are constituted through representations to produce definitions of women.

At the same time as feminists were challenging particular images of women new theoretical work emerged that undermined the very notion of representation on which much of the feminist critique had been based. The structural linguistics which developed from the work of the Swiss linguist Saussure

* The text is drawn from the introduction and conclusion of the forthcoming book – *Representing the Woman*, due out from Macmillan Press in May 1996. Some of the text and discussion of *Blue Steel* will appear in the *American Studies Journal* in Poland, and a version of that paper may be published in Serbia too. The discussion of *Smooth Talk* appears only in this paper, and the discussion of *Gun Crazy* is new work.

[1] Claire Johnston, "Womens's Cinema as Counter-Cinema", p. 31. *Notes on Women's Cinema*, London: SEFT, 1973.

showed that signification is produced not as the effect of a unique essence of the sign, a meaning given once and for all, but as a result of its functioning within a chain of signs; a sign s meaning is conditional upon its difference from other signs within that particular language system. For Saussure[2], however, the sign remained pre-eminently tied to the articulation of a mental concept in language – a concept for someone – which is to assume a concept or image, a referent, which pre-exists the sign and is waiting and available to be united with it. Thus a psychologism marks his theory of language – as well as the semiological project which has emerged from it.[3] But there is no gold standard for the sign, no guarantee of its truth or reality by virtue of the referent that lies behind the represented. Representation is not a system of signs referring to reality and therefore there can be no recourse to an original essence against which the achievement or shortcomings of images produced by cinema, television, literature etc can be measured. The corollary of this is that it is no longer possible to argue that woman as signifier of woman is absent or distorted in representation, for here again the signified, woman, is held to be a referent fully present to itself outside of the representation, and by which the representation can be judged as inadequate. Of course there are real women, but there is no essence woman, rather we are constructed as agents within the social by legal and economic discourses in which sexual difference may not be determining.

It is nevertheless through these meanings and definitions constructed in and by representation that we are constituted as subjects, addressed and interpellated by the discourses around us. While identities require contents they do not require any particular content and the construction of identity, of the subject, is not the effect of a set of contents of identification but the process of identification as such. Nevertheless as a result particular contents become invested as material supports for this identity. The corollary of this is that the definitions and meanings produced by forms of representation are not simply external and objective and thus available to rational reform. Social definitions are contingent – they can be changed and they have changed – but a change in the images alone may not change the form of psychical investment involved. The structural role of imaging for the subject must also be addressed and, I suggest, it is through psychoanalysis that we can begin to understand the pleasure of the image and our desire for the image in a way which is not first and foremost organised in terms of the meaning purported to be presented in the image. The pleasure of images is not just what they say to us as signification in the traditional, realist, sense, but also what they constitute for us as imagings. In other words, the pleasure of images in part at least is the pleasure not of what I come to know – signification – but of what I come to desire, that is, the scenario of desire which I come to participate in as I watch a film, view an image, or read a text. It is psychoanalysis which addresses the subject as the one who knows very well that the image is only an image, but who all the same takes it for real. This is the subject who misrecognises in Lacan's mirror phase as well as the subject who disavows.[4]

Desire for the image is therefore always potentially double, both a desire for the image (to be or to have the image) and a desire for imaging itself,

[2] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Lingustics* (1915), trans. Wade Baskin (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1966).

[3] See here the discussion of Saussure by Jacques Derrida, "Linguistics and Grammatology", in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Balimore and London, The Johnns Hopkins Press, 1976).

[4] Jacques Lacan, "The miror stage as foormative of the function of the I" *Čcrits, A Selection* (1966), trans. Alain Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, Tavistock, 1977)).

not as simple visual stimulus to biological sensory motors, but as the desire for the process which constitutes the self. Hence what is also produced in representations is the very position of desire for the spectator. Here too is the pleasure of images as fantasy. In cinema,the availability of social definitions enable its narrative figures to be readable by a social group, while at the same time film offers up the pleasures and pains of identifications and perhaps attendent identities in so far as it founds itself on scopophilic, epistemophilic and auditory pleasures in its presentation of figures of desire.

All this is to say that there is a certain power in the image which exceeds its function as the mere construction of a definition. Whether they are images of motherhood or of pornography, we cannot accept or reject them simply through an act of conscious will. We will be moved by images in ways which we neither expect, nor seek, nor want. And it is through the images and narratives of representation that we can find ourselves spoken in a way which we take to be real, or wish to be true. However the demand – whether by feminists or by ethnic groups – for images which are felt to be real and true can never be met in any absolute sense. For images are not already true, they become so only at the point at which they produce identification in the spectator-subject, when she or he finds them true. The issue of recognition and identification is central to understanding the role and power of images, but this does not involve a simple matching of self and image. What we are dealing with here is the *desire* for such images so that through these images and narratives we come to know ourselves as we truly are, truly know ourselves to be, at the same time only discovering all this in the moment of reading a novel, or in the act of watching a film. In this moment there arises what Jacques Lacan called the founding misrecognition of subjectivity – the mirror phase – in which the child joyfully seizes its image as itself, and identifies with it, thus coming to exist as a subject but one which is thereby already a split subject, divided between the ideal mirror image which is at the same moment lost forever, the self who identifies with it, and the image, the ego-ideal, by which it might regain its identity as perfect and perfectly lovable.[5] In this sense, therefore, we are our images.

It is here that the desire for realism arises, for that verisimilitude in our representations which Lyotard, following amongst others Brecht, so roundly condemns for what he calls its mission to address the subject as a unified centre of consciousness and knowledge and thereby to affirm the subject as a knowing subject.[6] The issue is not, however, to condemn realism as a system of deception, but to acknowledge its role in the construction of identity as unified, and to recognise our relation to realism as a relation of desire, a desire for that unified identity. This includes the desire to find one s place – in film, to be placed by the text. The spectator is thus not a passive victim but an eager consumer. Rachel M Brownstein in her book *Becoming a Heroine* pointed to the pleasures of literature for women as offering just that, a unified identity and one which was also idealised so that the heroine is someone important and special.

What the female protagonist of a traditional novel seeks – what the plot moves her toward – is an achieved, finished identity, realised in conclusive union with herself – as – heroine.[7]

[5] For Freud the term ideal-ego designates the ego's narcissistic investment in a lost ideal, perfection of the ego, and is distinguished from the ego-ideal or super-ego which is what the subject must bbecome, and which is founded on the deamands of a conscience. (*The Ego and the Id* (1923), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 19 (London: The Hogarth Press)) Where Freud uses ego-ideal and super-ego interchangeably Lacan has proposed a further distinction, so that the ego-ideal refers to what the subject seeks to become, while the term super-ego refers to a voice of prohibition, requiring the subject to desist in its desires. (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan – Book 1: Freuds's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 141.)

[6] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) p.74.

[7] Rachel M. Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. xxi.

Rachel Brownstein, however, is critical of popular romance fiction for what she sees as the misleading illusion of the self perfected through a resolution of the female destiny – by the idea of becoming a heroine,[8] while at the same time she acknowledges her own pleasure in and voracious consumption of such stories. Here again is the dilemma of feminism as it is caught between the politics and pleasures of positive, women-centred stories, and the difficulties of fantasy. Brownstein's solution is the heroine-centred novel which proposes a sophisticated version of the ideal of romance as the heroine comes to transcendent closure, but that ideal is undercut as transcendence and closure are characterised as romantic, proper to Art, not Life.[9] This solution is no solution at all, for it involves simply re-erecting the reality principle against fantasy. What is needed is not the re-assertion of the primacy of reality but an exploration oæ the junctures and disjunctures between fantasy and reality and the way in which our identity is constructed – or broken – on the contradictions and difficulties of being desiring subjects within the discourses of social relations. It is in our public, published forms of fantasy – of which cinema is one – that we play out, in the sense Freud gave to children's play, our relations of self and other, of desire and its repression, as well as the impossibility of desire, of its fulfillment.[10]

Fantasy for Freud is an imagined scene in which the subject is a protagonist, and which always represents the fulfillment of a wish albeit that its representation is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes. Freud saw the model of fantasy as the reverie or daydream, that form of novelette, both stereotyped and infinitely variable, which the subject composes and relates to himself in a walking state.[11] Fantasy is therefore primarily a *scene*. In their discussion of Freud's theory of fantasy the French psychoanalysts Laplanche and Pontalis emphasise that fantasy is characterised not by the achievement of wished-for objects but by the arranging of, a setting out of, the desire for certain objects.[12] It is a veritable *mise en scène* of desire, a staging of a scene. The paradigmatic staging Freud outlined here is what he termed the primal scene which presents the original or primal fantasy of the parents making love, and what is central here for Freud is that it is a scene that presents a variety of positions which the subject of the fantasy may take up, whether he or she is also represented in the scene or not. The figures in the scene – mother, father, child, onlooker – stand for positions of desire, to love or be loved from this place, to pleasure or be pleasured from this position. (It can also be said, therefore, that fantasies are not either active or passive; rather a scenario will include the possibility of both active and passive wishes). The public, published forms of fantasy, visual or literary, offer this same scenarioisation of fantasy. The spectator identifies not with the figures themselves within the narrative, but with the different positions of desire, as the object or the subject of desire, and finally with the position of the narrative s desire.

The concept of fantasy also allows us to understand cinema as an institution of desire and as a scenario for identification which avoids the models of the cinematic apparatus arising in the work of Christian Metz or Jean-Louis Baudry so aptly dubbed the 'bachelor machines' by Constance Penley, insofar as they posit a centred and unitary subject of desire, a masculine subject.[13] The linear

[8] *ibiid*, p. xxiv.

[9] *ibid* p. xxvi.

[10] Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming" (1908), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XI.

[11] J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality", *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis,*vol. 49, 1986, reprinted in *Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan, Routledge, (London 1986), p. 13.

[12] Laplanche and Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality", p. 17.

[13] Constance Penely, "Femminism, Film Theory and the Bachelor Machines", *The Future of an Illusion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 57.

progression of narrative is disturbed and re-ordered by the drive of fantasy, disrupting the possibility of a coherent or unified enunciating position. A fantasy-scenario does not present a simple progression to satisfaction, but a composite of positions of desire, so that we can no longer speak of a position of fantasy, and certainly not *a masculine* fantasy as simply dominant, as the 'organising' fantasy. Nor does a fantasy-scenario offer the spectator a set of multiple choices of positions of identification, rather it constitutes a particular array, textually orchestrated as a limited set of oppositions, which spectators must enter, and hence psychically be able to enter, or else the scenario will fail for them. The concept of fantasy does not itself provide the means to an alternative metapsychology of cinema, it does not secure a plural and mobile subject for film in opposition to the fixed – and masculine – spectator-subject of Metz and Baudry.[14] Fantasy, insofar as it is also the field of play of the death drive, defines the limits of the subject, not its infinite dispersal, and it is therefore as well a repetitive play of a certain fixing/unfixing. Fantasy is a form of representation, of thinking, which can be read as a symptom.

Addressing film as a fantasy structure has introduced the issue of feminine as well as masculine fantasy and desire into discussions of representation in film but the placings produced by the narration may not reproduce the fixed positions of gender, or to put it another way, of the man as masculine – the father, and of the woman as feminine – the mother. Fantasy fails therefore to produce the fixed and polarised positions – and identities – of men and women required for a feminist politics basing itself on a theory of patriarchy. Indeed, while the issue of feminine desire is introduced – in the films as well as the theoretical consideration here – the question now arises as to the nature of this 'femininity' and in what sense it is an attribute of women, and if it is, how far it is always and only an attribute of women.

## A counter-cinema

The possibility of that element or strategy of representation which will be the very death of representation as symbolic and thus as ideology has nevertheless remained a lure for many critical theorists. it is this project that lay behind Peter Wollen's discussion of Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Vent d'Est* (1969) and which he described as 'counter-cinema'. Claire Johnston reformulated this as a strategy for women's film-making in which the role of feminine desire as outside of the symbolic order would be central. In her concepts of the semiotic and of the abject, Julia Kristeva has posited a moment before the imposition of symbolic law which has appeared as a positive and positivised field of creative production. For Kristeva, however, this is neither simply undermining of the symbolic, nor necessarily a 'good thing'.[15] Jean-François Lyotard has proposed the 'Utopia behind the Scenes of the Phantasy'. Fantasy, he argues, is figural, not discursive and thus it does not partake of the structuring of language, of the law. It is a matrix, not a structure, it is not based on rules, nor is it instituted through structural oppositions, instead 'its capacity to contain several places in one place, to form a bloc out of what

[14] Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus", trans. Alan Williams, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 2 (Winter 1974-5). Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier", trans. Ben Brewster, in *The Imagnary Signifier* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

cannot possibly co-exist – is the secret of the figural, which transgresses the intervals that constitute discourse and the distances that constitute representation.'[16] Re-examining Freud's study 'A Child Is Being Beaten'[17] Lyotard concludes that in fantasy 'By a series of displacements that are highly irregular, the singular becomes plural, the feminine masculine, the subject becomes object, the determinate indeterminate and here becomes elsewhere.'[18] As a result he argues 'Now we understand that the principle of figurality which is also the principle of unbinding ... is the death drive: "the absolute of anti-synthesis": Utopia'.[19]

In the figural, as an aesthetic, the primary process 'erupts' into secondary processes, opposing the subordination of the image to the dictates of narrative meaning or representation, to language-like, rule-bound formalisms. A dualist opposition seems to be reasserted here, of the disrupting, nonrule-bound primary process on the one hand, and the fixity, structure and structuring, the emplacement and binding of the secondary process on the other hand. The primary process appears as the realm of a free – creative and unhindered – cathexis of energy, of the drives, in contrast to the control of the secondary process with its subordination of desire and the drives. But fantasy cannot be the 'good' place of plurality, polyvalency and mobility outside the law, outside of the binarism of signification. The paradoxical relation here cannot be resolved into a binary opposition between an imaginary or pre-imaginary flux, flow, and polyvalency on the one hand, and a domain of symbols, of structure and of a fixed placing of the subject – and therefore of 'ideology' – on the other hand, an opposition where one replaces or displaces the other. Such a dualist opposition is itself a fantasy, for the subject always remains exactly that – a subject who imagines its own dissolution, entering into a plurality of de- differentiation – for the place from which this division seems possible, from which it is desired, is the place of the subject who knows itself as subject, a centred ego. What else but a 'subject' can appeal to the primary process over the secondary? Lyotard's argument – while pitting the figural against the discursive – in fact emphasises in the figural not an essence or a given domain, not the death drive as such, but a process for, as David Rodowick says 'if phantasy [for Lyotard] is a machine for producing *jouissance* its utopian potential derives from the fact that *jouissance* is neither representation nor death, but something that oscillates between them.'[20] Nevertheless Rodowick posits fantasy as a process of the subject outside of and against the identities and identifications of discourse, which Rodowick places as simply Oedipal, as a result there remains the problem of the constitution of the subject as such and its identifications. The utopia of unbinding is however a rear-guard action, of the primary process against an already-in place secondary process. Fantasy as the production of an oscillation between representation and death is a player in a game already established.

For Lacan, therefore, fantasy is part of the problem, and not its solution. Fantasy is constituted in the human subject insofar as it is a subject of lack, that is, a subject divided between a present lack and an imagined presence. Fantasy is what fills out a certain lack, a kernel of non-sense in the subject, and, more importantly, in the other, and it is at the level of fantasy that the sub-

[15] Jacqueline Rose Suggests that in Powers of Horror (19800), (trans. Leon S. Rouidiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), Kristeva – as a response to the idealisation latent in her own formulations – was 'replying that the semiotic is no "fun"' ("Julia Kristeva – Take Two", *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, p. 155). Rose goes on to argue that while Kristeva's work "has, however, been attractive to feminism because of the way she exposes the complacent identities of psychosexual life," it cannot found an oppositional politics. But as soon as we try to draw out of that exposure an image of femininity which escapes the straitjacket of symbolic forms, we fall straight into that esentialism and primacy of the semiotic which is one of the most problematic aspects of her work. And as soon as we try to make of it the basis for a political identity, we turn the concept inside out, since it was a critique of identity that it was originally advanced. No politics without identity, but no identity which takes itself at its word. (p. 157)

[16] Lyotard, "Fiscourse Digure: The Utopia behind the Scenes of the Phantasy" (1974), trans. Mary lydon, *Theatre Journal*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1983, p. 344.

[17] Freud, "'A Child is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origins of the Perversions" (1919), *The Standard Edition*, vol. XVII.

ject continues to enjoy, which constitutes its *jouissance*. This *jouissance* binds the subject to the death drive, and the excess of signification and of the subject which arises is not free or freeing but loops the subject back to self-enclosed repetition. Fantasy here may escape or even oppose the constructions of the discursive, but it is not a point of release for it also enthralls the subject. Lacan therefore posits a beyond of fantasy as the resolution of psychoanalysis where the analysand 'goes through the fantasy' which sustains its desire and which produces the irreducible symptom that is the neurotic's bain and pleasure.

Fantasy, Freud said, is the means by which the subject 'attempts to replace a disagreeable reality by one which is more in keeping with the subject's wishes'.[21] It is difference which provides the most disagreeable reality, insofar as it presents to the subject its own lack in being; This reality of difference Lacan has re-termed the real. Social relations as well as parental fantasies and family structures determine the context for this negotiation of difference embarked upon by the small child, and thus too, the context for the production of all those fantasies which are part of this negotiation. The problem of the *jouissance* of the subject and of the other of desire requires an acceptance of and placing of oneself within sexual difference. At stake, as a result, is not anatomical difference but an issue of the subject's relation to desire. This poses to it a problem of otherness resolved as difference and it is through this difference that desire is now organised. The constitution of sexual difference in and for the human being thereby also constitues it as a subject in discourse and in the symbolic as a subject of lack. Sexual difference is not thus determining of other relations of difference, but it is determining of the subject.[22] It is the fantasies – of women as well as men – which arise as a result of the difficulties of difference and the symbolisation of the lack in the other which must be addressed therefore. And it is those fantasies that translate the difficulty of difference and its psychical and social organisation into a solution of subordination which must be challenged. Fantasy cannot, however, be divided up as either social or psychical. To borrow Saussure's metaphor for the relationship of the signifier and signified, fantasy is like a piece of paper, on the one side is the psychical, on the other the social, each distinct, but neither possible without the other, yet, and unlike Saussure's piece of paper, each penetrates the other. The social determines our psychical relations – for the family itself is a social form – but is also itself formed by psychical relations, of which fantasy is pre-eminent.

The apparent disjuncture between the social and the psychical disappears when we understand that the social relations of contingent reality, as well as the frames of understanding which we give to reality – our 'ideologies', are themselves formed through fantasy. Žižek suggests that 'Ideology is not a dream-like illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality, in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support of our 'reality' itself: an 'illusion' which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real-impossible kernel.[23] And, in a back-to-front way, elements of contingent, external and material reality are used to form the fantasy of social reality.

[18] Lyotard's reading here follows closely the view developed by Laplanche and Pontalis in "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality".

[19] Lyotard, "Fiscourse Digure: The Utopia behind the Scenes of the Phantasy", p. 357. Lyotard's reference here is to the essay by J.-B. Pontalis, "L'Utopie Freudienne", *L'arc* 34, 1968, p. 14.

[20] Rodowick, *The Difficulty of Difference* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 93. Roodowick seeks to displace identification in film in favour of a process of reading wherby "Reading encounters the text as a relation of difference not identity.", p. 138.

[21] Freud, "The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis" (1924), *The Standard Edition*, vol. XIX, p. 187.

[22] The problem of racial difference is not therby determined by the problem of sexual difference, and the problem of the group and other is clearly entwined with the problem of the subject and its other. This is only one aspect in the issue of racism which itself is, of course, not a singular phenomenon either historicaly or in our own contemporary period.

[23] Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 45.

Fantasy, as 'social reality', sets out a story of how things are – or could be – whereby the subject, or the group, can enjoy (live, work, play) without loss, in a state of plenitude. It thus covers over – more or less – the impossibility of the real. But only so far, for the traumatic-real kernel is itself constituted around a fantasy by which the subject sustains itself in its *jouissance*, an enjoyment without loss and hence outside symbolic relations. The fantasy attempts to sustain or repair this enjoyment, an effort made necessary because it is already jeapardised, penetrated by the symbolic. The impossibility of this *jouissance* – the real of lack – is covered over in fantasy not by denying lack (as in an hallucination) but by attrib uting it to a cause in social reality (rather than the real) whereby others act or have acted to deprive the subject or the group of its enjoyment[24]. Fantasy, in imagining enjoyment without loss, always posits a loss already enacted to which it answers. It therefore always inscribes loss in the very moment it seeks to annihilate it.

It has often been women who have been aligned with this 'traumatic-real kernel' of fantasy. This has involved two aspects, on the one hand it produces woman as the idealised but unreachable other, which is a particular fantasy of 'woman', producing the symptom 'woman' as the condition or guarantee of an enjoyment without loss. On the other hand the demands and desires of women pose back to the man the very impossibility of such enjoyment, provoking a wrath without equal, and producing another fantasy and discourse of woman, now denigrated and reviled. Both impose an impossible identity for women. A response to the impossibility of this discursive fantasy or definition has arisen in the competing arguments and discourses of feminism which seek to 'quilt' – in the sense introduced by Žižek's – differently the ideological space. Žižek argues that the 'floating signifiers' of social discourse are quilted into what thereby becomes an ideological space, a structured network of meaning: If we 'quilt' the floating signifiers through 'Communism', for example, 'class-struggle' confers a precise and fixed signification to all other elements: to democracy (so-called 'real democracy' as opposed to 'bourgeois formal democracy' as a legal form of exploitation), to feminism (the exploitation of women as resulting from the class- conditioned division of labour).... What is at stake in the ideological struggle is precisely which of the 'nodal points' [of the quilting] will totalise, include in its series of equivalances, these free-floating elements.'[25]

Rather than Communism, of course, the meanings can be quilted through feminism, producing a competing discourse which 'pins down' the subject differently, which organises a different buttoning of the couch through which the subject, and the woman, is stitched into the chain of signification and of desire. But a left-over will still be produced as a residue tracing the failure of the discourse to wholly contain the 'floating signifiers'. Instead his point is that in both there is something which disturbs, something which makes incomplete the totalisation of ôhe buttoning down of meaning, and of the subject, so that there is something missing, a lack is also inscribed and something is always left-over as a residue – the *objet petit a*. The *objet petit a* has a paradoxical role here, a kind of borderline function which confounds

[24] On the question of the group's, or the nation's enjoyment", see Slavoj Žižek, "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead", *New Left Review*, no. 183, pp. 50-6; and Glenn Bowman, "Xenofobia, Fantasy and the Nation", in *The Anthropogy of Europe*, eds. Victoria A. Goddard, Joseph R. Llobera and Cris Shore (Oxford: Berg, 1995).

[25] Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 87.

any simple division of representation into a fixing and unfixing of the subject. The emergence of the *objet a* frames reality for the child, enabling the child to represent itself and its losses and thus to cross from the realm of the real to the domain of the imaginary. Subsequently it is the element which secures the subject as subject, but it does so insofar as the *objet a* is what falls away from the subject – and the narrative – unused and unusable. The objet a itself becomes a little piece of the real – hence Lacan terms it the blot or stain which 'spoils' the picture – it is unsymbolisable and as a result, it must drop out or sink before any symbolic reality can emerge.

Thus, alongside the feminist arguments for equality and social justice – themselves socially constructed concepts though which we organise our desire – there arises as well a discourse of 'discontent', a fantasy in which it is the Other, men, who enjoy – to women's cost – while the woman is excluded from access to this *jouissance*. All that is worthwhile and good, all that ensures enjoyment, rests in the hands of the other – of men. Of course, since women have been excluded from areas of social activity and from the scope for sexual activity men have enjoyed, this 'discontent' is founded on a reality; it is quite justified. Yet the 'enjoyment' of men here is also a fantasy, it is not secured or constituted through denying women *something*, which we could get, or get back. This 'enjoyment' is the *jouissance* of the other which we can never obtain, though the other too will enviously fantasise our 'enjoyment' from which he is excluded.[26]

Fantasy can neither be abolished nor simply given a good, proper content. The real of lack, the kernel of nonsense which disturbs fantasy and undoes ideology, is not a resource of resistance to fantasy and to the discourses of social reality but a part of the problem they pose. We may, however – by allowing in the excluded, impossible residue which continues to press upon our ideological 'quilting' as an eruption, a disturbance – open a space to re-quilt, to stitch over again and in another way the fixings of fantasy and their implications for our social relation, nevertheless this quilting itself will be rent by the real of lack it cannot contain or cover over. While fantasy is a way of imagining things otherwise, so long as it posits a possible enjoyment it remains a closed loop, returning us to a problem of lack it promised to abolish, and offering no way out. What is needed is not the abolition of desire as such, however, but the refusal of jouissance and the acceptance of a certain impossiblity, of something unsatisfiable, in desire. It is only then that we can imagine – wish – things otherwise while also acknowledging that there can be no, utopian, solution – that is – no full and sufficient satisfaction.

### Negotiating fantasy, reality and the real in representation

Works of imagination, fictional stories in literature and film, are part of our negotiation of 'sour reality', the real in Lacan's schema, while they also trace the very domain of that 'real'. Our fantasies, as public and published forms, are scenarios which will both evade and remark the problem of a desire which is always other. A film may resolve the difficulties of difference in a

[26] The notion "Womb-envy" has been put forward as an apparent equivalent to the woman's "penis-envy". If this is so, in each case what is really sought is not what one lacks oneself but what seems to secure the enjoyment of the other.

fantasy of a centred feminine subject of desire, such as in *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Susan Seidelman, 1985), which is about a woman who becomes a heroine, who achieves an identity in Brownstein's sense. The film is a delightful 'screwball' comedy whose central fantasy is the idealised and extra-ordinary figure of Susan, a rock singer (played by Madonna); this figure is searched out by the heroine, Roberta (Rosanna Arquette), from clues in messages to and by Susan in the personal columns of newspapers in order to escape her dull housewife s life. Roberta desires to be or to be like Susan, but then displaces Susan by taking her identity – first just her clothes, then her name, and then her lover. The heroine thereby escapes her oppressive marriage, for the plot contrives to swap the women s partners. Roberta becomes romantically involved with Susan's erst-while lover, thus realising herself as the sexual and sexually-fulfilled woman she always could be. Meanwhile Susan encounters – and sexually dominates – Roberta's husband, producing not only a role exchange with Roberta, but also a role reversal for Roberta s husband. Yet she never becomes Susan; instead Roberta identifies with Susan s position as a subject and object of desire. As a comedy the film can draw on generic expectations to motivate the extravagant wishfulfillment of the narrative. Everyone gets what they want, or their just deserts, and the problem of wanting, of desire, is successfully resolved. The film affirms that things can be otherwise if we pursue our desires – for Roberta's fantasy obsession with Susan leads her to a new relationship – and it centres women as subjects of desire.[27]

In contrast women's films may figure the difficulties of difference as a structuring element of their narration and which the narrative cannot wholly resolve. In presenting such scenarios feminine cinema, to paraphrase Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, does not speak a different desire, rather it addresses the issue of desiring in difference.[28] It is this understanding which I want to give Claire Johnston's call for a women's cinema which will 'embody the working through of desire'. Moreover, for psychoanalysis fantasy is not only the realm of pleasurable wishes, but also a domain of anxiety. Fantasy is subject to defensive processes, notably repression, for example the Oedipal wish for the mother but which returns in a displaced form, or it may be turned around, from active to passive. This latter is the process in which adult sado-masochistic fantasy scenarios can be located, producing a pleasure not so much in being beaten as in what this represents, what it makes present, namely the forbidden wish. Fantasy, then, may involve wishes and positions which, logically, cancel each other out – the wish to have something and not to have it, or the wish to be punished for one s wish. And fantasy may also involve aggressive wishes which have been projected onto others, producing a fear of attack from outside and a fear of punishment by others for one's forbidden wishes – although such punishment may also be a wish. Public forms of fantasy too involve the exploration of such fears, and the wishes and projections which gave rise to them.

In the following I want to consider the kind of positions of identity and identification which these films produce through their presentation of fantasy scenarios which are negative and defensive, which do not produce a euphoria

[27] The fantasies here are not specific to women, however, and instead *Desperately Seeking Susan* Asserts itself as a "woman's story" by its deployment of the conventions of sexual difference, creating a versimilitudinous world of women – the film, for example, opens in a beauty parlour, emphatically placing its heroine in a *mise en scène* of conventionallacoded feminiinity. It is the conviction of the film's versimilitude which marks it as a women's film – and which might also prevent men identifying with the heroine Roberta – not any essential femininess of the fantasy.

[28] Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p. 2.

of positive identification and pleasure. *Blue Steel* (Katherine Bigelow, USA, 1990) presents a fantasy-scenario which brings about the opposite of the desired event. Its heroine, Megan, is the film s active protagonist. She wishes to be on the side of the law, to partake of its powers, a wish which is realised at the beginning of the film when she graduates from training school as a policewoman. Megan s fantasy, to possess the power of the law, becomes a nightmare when the man she desires shows himself to be obsessed with her precisely as the woman with the gun/phallus, and which he desires as an absolute and pure violence, as the power of death rather than life. Moreover he has identified with her – they are two halves of one person he says, in a grotesque inversion of the romantic language of ideal union between lovers.

*Blue Steel* is not, however, merely an unfulfilled fantasy – whether Megan s or Eugene's. Megan does not fail to possess the power of the phallus, rather she, as it were, goes through the fantasy of phallic power and her identification with the law. The film parades the myth both Megan and Eugene subscribed to – of a phallic power which can really be possessed – only to explode the myth. That the parodying of the gun/phallus is a deliberate project of the film is signalled by the credit-sequence which presents a montage of pans and close-ups of a Smith & Wesson being loaded, the gun appearing as a shiny, luminous object, a fetish and a sign conventionally read in cinema as signifying phallic power. These shots may be inferred, retrospectively, as Megan s point-of-view when she puts the gun in her holster as she dresses, and this is also the view and fantasy of the filmic enunciation. It will subsequently also be Eugene s view of Megan, her would-be lover and the film's banker-turned-serial-killer Megan is hunting. Megan as the woman with the gun/phallus is the point-of-view Eugene has as he lies on a supermarket floor in terror, watching her shoot an armed robber. Appropriated by Eugene, the robber's gun becomes the cause of his desire. At the close of the film, having brought about Eugene's death, Megan discards her gun however, and the gesture implies that it ceases to embody her desire. This is clearly quite different to castration.

Tamra Davis's 1991 film *Gun Crazy* similarly centers and displaces the conjunction of the gun and desire. Her film is ostensibly a re-make of the 1950 version of *Gun Crazy*, a *noir* couple-on-the-run story directed by Joseph H. Lewis and orginally titled *Deadly is the Female*, but it reverses and overturns the *film noir* conventions of its forerunner. Davis's film opens with the woman of the couple – fifteen year-old Anita – the butt of her teacher's sarcasm at school, and later giving sex to a couple of loutish youths in return for their brief attention, and returning home – to a trailer and her absent mother's boyfriend, Rooney, who she also sexually services. Anita begins a penpal correspondence with Howard, currently in jail for robbery and violent assualt, and they fall in love. His own obsession with guns inspires Anita and Rooney teaches her how to shoot, to his cost for she guns him down him after he has forced himself on her once again. Howard and Anita's love blossoms when he is released on parole in the care of Hank, Anita's friend and local mechanic/preacher. Hank insists the couple marry after finding

them together – apparently having made love after a shooting session. But Howard is impotent with Anita, and even after their wedding he cannot consumate the marriage – exchanging secrets, he tells Anita he is a virgin, he's always been scared he would 'lost it'. Anita then reveals her secret – Rooney's body in the freezer. Disposing of it at a local burner the two youths turn up, taunting Anita. Howard asks them to apologise and pulls his gun and Anita fearing he is about to shoot, pushes it away so that it goes off, hitting one of the men. The other lunges at Howard with a knife and is also shot. After burying them the couple shower and sleep like angels, the camera picking out a gun a bullets beside them. The couple are forced on the run when Howard's parole officer calls him in, and Anita shoots a policeman. Having discovered that Anita's mother is a prostitute the couple find a house empty and spend the night there, dressed in the expensive clothes of the owners, eating their food and acting the successful couple, they finally consumate their marriage and guns are noticably absent from the shots. Instead, as they lay together afterwards, Anita says they'll be killed soon, and that she never really wanted time before until she met him. The fantasy of the gun as a magical solution, an amulet which protects the owner, gives way to a properly symbolic understanding of lack, of desire and its impossibility. In the 1950 version sexuality and the gun are successfully combined in the girl, Annie Laurie Starr, also a sharpshooter and the feature of a carnival sideshow who lures Bart Tare into robbery and murder. Howard and Anita, however, are innocents forced by circumstances to kill. And whereas Bart finally kills Annie to prevent her shooting his two childhood friends who are following in order to pursuade him to give himself up, Howard goes out all guns blazing against the police who have surrounded the house, telling Anita to say that he 'made me do it'. He dies for something, not nothing, and the violence of their lives is shown to be not simply or only of their own making.

The transformation of wishful fantasy into nightmare is also found in *Smooth Talk* (Joyce Chopra, USA,1985).[29] The film is about a girl's – Connie's – adolescence, and about a summer holiday hanging around with her girlfriends at the beach and at the shopping mall. It is very much Connie's story, of her growing wish to be involved with boys, a wish to be wanted by boys and hence, though not directly voiced, to enter into sexual awareness, and this is the central fantasy scenario of the film: Connie's wish to love and to be loved sexually. However she is also presented as a brat, selfish and thoughtless. She is narcissistically self-absorbed – she forgets the painting and decorating materials her mother asked her to purchase, then later she is shown trying out different poses in front of her mirror as she practices lines for chatting to boys with. Her mother focalises this negative view of Connie, saying 'I look into your eyes and all I see are trashy day-dreams'. We may identify with Connie and her self-absorbtion as something we have also done, a recognition of having been the same, once – relating to our earlier self with the same narcissistic investment that Connie applies to herself (such recognition, arising from the film's realism and verisimilitude, also functions as forepleasure, enabling an identification because of similarity which opens the spectator to also having the same *wish*[30]). We may also identify with her mother as the point of an enun-

[29] Smooth Talk, also released in 1985, was adapted from a short story by Joyce Carol Oates, and scripted by Tom Cole, Joyce Chopra's Husband. Laura Dern plays Connie. My analysis of these films will place them within Teresa de Laurentis's definition of the role of women's cinema, "to enact the contradiction of the female desire, and of women as social subjects, in the terms of narrative; to perform its figures of movement and closure, image and gaze, with the constant awareness that spectators are historically engendered in social practices, in the real world, and in cinema too", *Alice Doesn't – Feminism, Semiotics*, Cinema (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 156.

[30] Joyce Carol Oates has commented "Conie is shallow, vain, silly, hopeful, doomed – perhaps as I saw, and stil see, myself? – but capable nonetheless of an unexpected gesture of heroism at the story's end"; *The New York Times*, 32, March 1986.

ciation which is critical of Connie. At the same time her mother's critical view proposes another Connie, the Connie she should be in order to conform to the demands of reality, to the symbolic – hence our identification here may be with the voice of the super-ego. We may also, however, identify with the mother's wish for Connie to be the daughter she wants her to be, and to be this for her – identifying therefore with the place of enunciation of what is for Connie's mother an ideal-ego – her daughter as ideal, but which she fails to be. For Connie it is the place of an ego-ideal, of what she must be in order to be what her mother wants. Connie's mother, however, wants her to be, or to remain, her little daughter of earlier times – but Connie must grow up and grow away. The film also focalis es Connie's older sister June, and her friend Jill, each of whom is shown to experience a sense of sexual lack in themselves in comparison to Connie. Jill is scared of the sexuality Connie and their friend Laura are exploring in their secret meetings with boys at a diner, while June is the plain sister who has failed to have such experiences. Our place 'with' or 'as' Connie is therefore qualified by the way the narration also places us with the desire of other characters.

The scene of Connie with her boyfriend in his car offers a similarly complex scenario for identification. While centrally focalised through Connie's words before she flees from the ardour of their kisses – she says 'Stop...I'm...not used to feeling this excited.' – we do not necessarily wish to flee, or wish her to flee – as Connie does. For her boyfriend appears here as the ideal first lover, older but only slightly, who offers a tender and gentle but nonetheless erotic introduction to sexual relations as he sensuously massages her shoulders and back, no doubt foreplay prior to unfastening her bra. He is the lover we might wish to have or to have had, or to be. Connie however is frightened and runs off, for while we are shown that she is excited and aroused, that she wants Eddie's lovemaking, she cannot actively choose this experience. All this takes place in an underground carpark, the *mise en scène* introducing connotations of tackiness, of something out of place and nasty.

The coarse and theatening side of male sexuality is realised in the next sequence when Connie has to walk home, to whistles and calls and then jeers from men in passing cars. (Laura and her father – who was to be their lift home – aren't there to meet her as arranged – Laura has been found out and is back at home, Connie's mother, too, will discover what, or what she thinks, Connie has been doing.) This both sustains the films's realism while it figures the terms of the question Connie confronts regarding her sexual desire, namely, whether her feelings are good or bad, and whether the object of her feelings – men – are sexually good or bad. That this is the conflict is confirmed the next day when her mother accuses Connie of having slept around, yet it was just because Connie felt that she waó a 'good girl' that she fled from Eddie. Her mother's accusation is false, Connie didn't do anything. But insofar as she wanted to, her mother's words reduce Connie's feelings to something dirty and shaming. Here the narrative is once more focalised through Connie.

The film, in its displaying of Connie for our view, as it watches her and 'discovers' her secrets, also narrates a position of desire for Connie as sexual

object, for her nubile and innocent sexuality. It is a voyeuristic desire which is then given a narrative representative within the film in the figure of Arnold Friend, yet this no doubt impedes as much as it reinforces identification with that position of desire, for it is now a character's desire, and no longer merely and more safely the narrative's desire. Now given a character's look, the voyeurism is 'shown', that is, 'seen' by the film, and by us as spectactors, but it is shown without any sanctioning motivation, so that it may now seem unacceptably – unpleasurably – voyeuristic, and Arnold's marked look at Connie outside the diner appears as a portent of a future threat.

It is through the figure of Arnold Friend that *Smooth Talk* presents a fantasy-scenario which brings about the opposite of the desired event. Connie's longed-for but also feared sexual experience is realised in her encounter with Arnold Friend who, while he claims to occupy the place of her desire, to be able to give her what she wants, is also presented by the film connotatively – in his clothes, his car, his manner – as an abject though menacing caricature. Arnold, having learnt about Connie from Jill, arrives at Connie's home after, we may infer, seeing her family drive off leaving Connie alone – she has refused to go with them to a neighbour's barbeque following her row with her mother. Arnold's appearance as well as his car (the series of crosses on the wing marking his sexual successes) seem extravagant and are the occasion of humour at first, for Connie as well as the spectator, until his verbal ploys betray a threatening insistence and he appears monstrous and abject.

Connie tries to escape, withdrawing inside her home she shuts the door on Arnold, but she cannot still his voice, which now articulates the veiled threats already apparent while continuing to speak her desire for sexual knowledge. As he says, he knows what she wants, and he can give it to her. Connie's attempt to phone her mother is anticipated by Arnold, who tells her he'll cut the line, nevertheless the film has her leave with Arnold without provoking him to enact the violence his words and body language threaten.

After Arnold's long scene of 'seduction' the film elides the sexual event itself, only showing Connie returning to her home in his car so that we don't 'really know' what happened – we cannot tell if Connie was pleasured or not, we do not know if he 'fulfilled' her or not. Unrepresented in the film, it is markedly 'repressed', refused to the spectator, thereby also signifying the encounter as unrepresentable, as the 'real'. As a result, too, it becomes ambiguous, uncertain, and perhaps nothing happened, perhaps it was just Connie's imagination on a hot afternoon. Yet at no time does the film mark the action as fantasy, while the meaning of Arnold's intentions is made absolutely clear – he offers himself as her first lover, as the fantasy-man who can give her all she wants, and what she has always wanted. So the question remains – was Connie raped or was she willing? Connie resists, but not to the end. She leaves the house voluntarily, as Arnold demanded, but, once back home, Connie's warning to Arnold not to come near her again makes it certain that it is not something she wants to repeat with him. So, just as a judge and jury in our courts of law, we may question whether after all she did really want it. In any case given her behaviour – brattish and shallow, she's pretty and flirtatious but can't make up her mind what she wants – we may think that it is no more

than she deserves. Or does she – as Joyce Carol Oates suggests – sacrifice herself for the sake of her family to prevent Arnold and his sidekick carrying out their threats to destroy her home? If so this is not confirmed and hence motivated in the film so that Connie does not appear a properly heroic victim. The scene is undoubtedly a 'downer' to spectators sympathetic to Connie, for the film, and Connie, fail to give us a proper image of resistance; Connie is neither properly a victim, nor does the film reassure us that we can, or a woman can, resist successfully. The film fails to offer us a positive image. Connie is not already a heroine, able to act – or submit – heroically, nor does she become the heroine of her own story through her experiences. Instead she is confronted with something like the demand 'Your money or your life!' which Lacan used to illustrate the fundamental alienation of the subject in its acceding to the symbolic, for a price must be paid, something must be given up, 'If I choose money, I lose both. If I choose life, I have life without money, namely a life deprived of something.'[31] Whether she resists or submits Connie loses. If she resists Arnold, he will almost certainly violently rape her, as well as causing damage to her home and, by extension, to her family, while her parents will find out, and she will become for them sexually sullied, 'damaged goods'. But more, she will be revealed as the slut her mother has already accused her of being, for, after all, Arnold would not have followed her if she had not paraded herself, put herself forward for men at the diner. What is happening to her is certainly 'her own fault'. Better, then, to submit to Arnold Friend. Of course in doing so she takes up the position of sexual knowledge which her mother had forbidden her, accepting along with it a punishment. It is as if in order to become a subject of sexual desire Connie must enact a scenario of punishment, just as Freud's patients did in their fantasy 'A Child is Being Beaten'.

The ambiguity produced around the events of this hot afternoon foregrounds Connie's subjective experience, as if the scene were her dream – or nightmare. But while the focalisation here is centred on Connie, identification does not necessarily follow. The filmic narration fails to show us how to understand what she 'really' wants, or to tell us what we should want for her, and hence enable us to enter into the scene. It has ceased to narrate a fantasy position for the spectator-subject. Things are no longer properly 'buttoned-down' for us. As a result the film does not confirm Connie as the subject of its 'punishing fantasy', it does not confirm it as her desire although it narrates it as a possible scenario – for her and the spectator, and it thereby *displays* this fantasy as such.

The self-censorship or guilt which produces this punishing scenario in the film and in Connie is the internalisation of the parental – here the mother's – probibition of sexual desire on pain of being a slut, dirty, and the film suggests that this is just how she feels as she leaves Arnold's car. The difficulty for Connie of achieving an active feminine desire is not only the result of a patriarchal discourse which condemns her desires, but also the problem of a parental discourse – represented by her mother – which defines sexuality as transgressive because it places her outside the family, because it realigns her relation to both her mother and father as an adult, as it must. And this is

[31] And, Lacan says, "Thiis alienating *or* is not an arbitrary invention, nor is it a matter of how one sees things. It is a part of language itself." In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis,* trans. Alan Aheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 212.

indeed what happens; her parents remain ignorant of the afternoon's events, but Connie's knowledge places her forever beyond childhood.

Ruby Rich, reviewing the film in *The Village Voice*,[32] pointed to the role of parental prohibition and placed this with the film's director, Joyce Chopra, 'the 48-year-old mother of a teenage daughter. And she's made a movie with a message for teenage daughters everywhere, keep a lid on your sexuality, don't you dare express it, don't you ever act out those "trashy daydreams" (as Connie's mother puts it) or you'll get it. Like a grownup bogeyman, Arnold Friend will come and get you.' That Arnold is like a figure from a fairytale is no doubt correct. Oates's original story drew on a case from the 1960s of a man – dubbed 'The Pied Piper of Tucson' – who seduced and occasionally murdered teenage girls, which Oates initially sought to cast as a realistic 'allegory of the fatal attractions of death (or the devil). An innocent young girl is seduced by way of her own vanity; she mistakes death for erotic romance of a particularly American trashy sort.' The conservatism of this moral view is clear, but it is not the story Oates wrote, or the one which was filmed. Instead, as Oates says, the focus of the story shifted from the 'charismatic mass murderer' to the teenage girl – still vain and foolish (like Oates herself may have been, she said) but no longer simply duped, and, too, capable of heroism. The story now articulates the contradictions between the *jouissance* of the drive and desire in the symbolic for the woman – as, perhaps, did the original folk or fairy stories.[33]

Connie is subject to fantasy, both its scenarios of wishfulfillment and its scenarios of punishment. What emerges is not a unified feminine identity – whether punished or triumphant – but a femininity, in the sense of being a subject of sexual difference, forged on these contradictions, for in the gap opened up is figured the real of desire and the impossibility of its representation. The reconciliation between Connie and her mother at the close of the film signifies Connie's rite of passage because it figures an irreparable separation between mother and daughter. Connie is playing-out the role of the good daughter she can now never be, for she cannot be the ideal her mother demands, and which would resolve the lack in both Connie and her mother. Connie now knows this, though her mother doesn't. In this knowledge Connie accepts lack in the Other, and passes from childhood to an adult sexuality organised through the terms of lack in the symbolic order. When Connie begins to tell her sister June what happened to her that afternoon June's look – of horror or disbelief – stops her and she goes on to deny that anything happened after all. What is unspeakable here is not, however, the horror of the afternoon's events, but the ambivalence, the contamination of desire in abjection. It is in this unspeakable and its repression that Connie's womanliness is forged by the narration.

*Smooth Talk*'s narrative strategies are important in producing its radical undermotivation of character, narrative and action (an undermotivation also seen in *Gun Crazy*). Smooth Talk becomes 'plotless' while its most plotted action – Arnold's seduction/rape of Connie, made possible just because she stayed at home after her row with her mother – is narratively enigmatic. Drawing both on Italian neo-realist cinema and on American 'observational' docu-

[32] Ruby Rich, "Good Girls, Bad Girls", *The Village Voice*, 15th April 1986, p. 67.

[33] In pointing to a shift or change I don't think an "original" and radical function of the fairytale was lost or expelled in the cultural transposition of these tales as a result of their coming to be written and published stories from the late seventeenth-century on. In their pre-modern form the tales emphasised the arbitrariness of fate and desire, without explanation – things were so and they were incommensurable. In the early modern era the assumption that, by God's grace, through human will and endeavour things may be different, replaces fate with the moral failure of the individual, while the late modern era of the twentieth-century has substituted rationality with morality. Modern tales speak their time and culture no less than earlier tales. What we want is not a pre-modern notion of the contingent but a post-modern squaring of rationality and the impossible real.

mentary films, *Smooth Talk*'s eviction of conventional narrative motivation pares the story down to an obscene cinematic realism, foregrounding the arbitrary and contingent, refusing proper sense-making.[34] It appears to confirm patriarchy and the punishment of the women's sexuality, justifing Ruby Rich's claim that 'the lure of *Smooth Talk* is a simple one: the spectacle of lust delivered unto the audience and then the punishment of its female embodiment, again for audience pleasure.'[35] But such a version of the film denies Connie's very desire, and the abject in femininity. There is something in Arnold that Connie wants.....the real of her desire, its jouissance. We need to acknowledge this in femininity, together with its symptoms and fantasies, in order to unhook this enjoyment from its apparent support – male figures such as Arnold and their sexual exploitation of women.

Arnold is the *objet a*, the little bit of the real which must drop out before symbolisation can occur. Arnold is not thereby Connie's real object of desire, on the contrary he stands in as the cause of her desire. The real of desire – enjoyment or *jouissance* – cannot be found in objects, so many substitutes, but appears instaed at the place of loss – death. That Arnold is an incarnation as well as a caricature of stereotypical masculine attitudes to women, that he verisimilitudinously fits a socially real persona, certainly motivates his coming to figure as *objet a* within the filmic narration, but it is as a joke, for he precisely cannot be the idealised figure of fantasy, a proper, worthwhile love object. An obscene element, he is all one would want to turn away from in a sexual relation, but to do so one must also embrace and identify with this cause of one's desire in order to pass by *jouissance* and enter desire. The film is not a moral tale, as Rich supposes, which seeks to warn us that men like Arnold are waiting to deflower us – or our daughters. Rather it is a fairy tale which figures the issue of our desire, and appropriately, at least for the modern fairy tale, it has a happy ending, but – being a fairy tale, that is, fantastic – the ending reveals that it cannot cover over or resolve what has gone before. Desire and *jouissance* are incommensurable.

Chopra's film does not present a positive image or utopia of feminine desire, instead it explores the junctures between fantasy, reality and the contingent real of desire, and hence the way in which the identity of 'woman' is constructed on the contradictions and difficulties for humans of being desiring subjects within the discourses of social relations. It is, therefore, feminine cinema. The difficulties the film addresses show why, too, feminism remains a political necessity.

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[34] "Observational" documentary film has also been termed direct cinema or *cinéma vérité*, although this last term derives from a French documentary tradition which, while similarly seeking a direct observational filming of reality, nevertheless also includes self-reflectively an acknowledgement of the process of filmmaking and the presence of the film-maker. Joyce Chopra began her career as a documentary filmmaker working within the direct cinema tradition with, for example, Richard Leacock on *A Happy Mother's Day* and *The Fisher Quintuplets* (1965).

[35] Rich, "Good Girls, Bad Girls", p. 67.