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Feminist Film Theory and the Postfeminist Era *Disney's Mulan*

FEMINISM WITHOUT WOMEN

In 1998, Disney adapted a Chinese poem titled “The Ballad of Mulan” to the Hollywood screen. I viewed the movie not as a specialist in film theory but as a parent. My daughter, half Chinese and far away from my cultural origins, might never be able to read the poem in Chinese, but she could at least know the story through the pleasure of film. Disillusioned after seeing *Mulan*, I decided to conduct a critical study of such “postfeminist” movies.

“The Ballad of Mulan” dates back to the Southern-Northern Dynasty (AD 420-589). This dynasty was a dark age; feudalism disintegrated when civil wars and foreign invasions divided the preceding empire into small territories. The rich and the royal retreated to the South because of “barbarian” invasions. Eventually, through relentless bloodbaths and cultural assimilations, some of the invaders would be wiped out, some cast away to Europe, and some absorbed into China’s multi-ethnic mosaic. “The Ballad of Mulan” comes from the oral tradition of the North, where “barbarians” had freed women from the oppressive social codes of Confucianism. It tells the story of a young woman who takes her sick father’s place in order to perform his military duty. It is a short folk epic, appreciated, revised, and rewritten for various reasons throughout the ages. In the T’ang Dynasty – a time of Buddhist Romanticism – Mulan was a figure of liberty; in the Sung Dynasty – another era of foreign invasions – she

represented the Chinese people's desire to reclaim the land conquered by northern neighbours; in the Ming Dynasty, she was used to resurrect the Confucian virtue that demands that children make sacrifices for their parents' sake. During the communist revolution, she was praised as a proletarian woman warrior and liberator.

Each age reconstructed Mulan's story to serve its own social purposes, so there is no point in criticizing Disney simply because it appropriated this Chinese folk tale. Stories have to be changed; as I advocate throughout this book, stories *are* an agent of change. Nevertheless, one must guard against an unconditional surrender to the transformative power of the film art because the same power can be used in the service of social conformity. A critical inquiry should highlight how the source material has been changed: in *Mulan*, Disney reworked the story to match what it perceived to be the belief system of its viewers; in turn, the film itself frames the ideology of American culture.

In constructing *Mulan*, Disney extracted one basic element from the tale: Mulan takes her father's place to fight in the army. Pandering to postfeminist America, the rest of the storyline is a battle against an American version of Chinese patriarchy that forbids women from becoming soldiers. The characterization of Mulan contradicts her physical portrait. Disney's Mulan has the mind of a superhero; she and her comrades march to the front only to find that invading Huns have wiped out China's main army, but against desperate odds, they choose to stand against the Hun advance. Being physically the weak link of her squad, she almost fails her training and fights only one battle. As the heroine, she is responsible for transforming an imminent defeat into victory, yet she does so neither by skill nor military strategy. She wins the battle by firing one cannon at a nearby snow-covered mountain, creating an avalanche that engulfs almost the entire Hun army. This plot development is symptomatic of the American perspective: a large-scale war can easily be won with precision bombing, but psychopathic terrorist groups present real trouble.

The conflict between Mulan and Chinese patriarchy comes immediately after the avalanche. Mulan's comrades discover that she is a girl and, following the army's cruel patriarchal law, abandon her on the snowy mountain. Because she has been left behind, she learns that a small but fierce group of Huns has survived and plans to take the emperor's city. Entering the city herself, she attempts to warn people about the impending danger, but nobody believes her because she is female. The Huns duly arrive and take the emperor hostage. The most unconvincing scene is about border-crossing – postmodern and post-

feminist in a sense. In this scene, in order to rescue the emperor, Mulan cross-dresses her comrades as imperial concubines to infiltrate the palace where the Emperor has been captured. They save China from the dishonourable terrorists with their femininity. This cross-dressing scene is certainly designed to make girls feel good about being “women” by evoking a sense of poetic justice after what the men have done to Mulan for her transgression.

Although every age reconstructs Mulan to fit its time, one central theme seems consistent in all the Chinese revisions: the story expresses Chinese people’s war weariness. Dynasties rise and fall, bringing many disastrous wars. No matter how dramatically the people of each dynasty change the poem to fit themselves, the devastation of war remains in sharp focus:

She fought her way through ten thousand miles,
Speeding over mountain gates.
Chill winds spread the odour of blood,
Cold sun polished her iron armour.
Countless perished in countless wars,
Yet warriors returned after many falls.
(from “The Ballad of Mulan,” my translation)

In all the Chinese versions, Mulan, neither romanticized nor glamorized, is depicted as a survivor, not a superhero. In a T’ang Dynasty version, she fights beside her companions for twelve years – yes, Mulan is not the ever-young beauty presented by Disney. The Chinese lunar calendar uses twelve animals to represent each year in its twelve-year cycle. Each cycle marks a stage of life: childhood (1-12), youth (13-24), maturity (25-36), the age of strength (37-48), the age of gold (49-60), and the age of dusk (61-72). The description of twelve years, therefore, should not be taken literally. In the Chinese language, “twelve years” refers to Mulan’s loss of her youth to war, just as “ten thousand miles” means a very long way. According to the ballad, it is Mulan’s long and superior service record that brings her to the attention of the emperor, who awards her the highest honour for soldiers. The T’ang poem never suggests that Mulan wins the war for China (historically, the wars of the Southern-Northern Dynasty did not cease for seven decades). Only Disney’s version glamorizes its protagonist and her victory to fulfill a heroic fantasy.

On the surface, Disney’s *Mulan* seems to desire women’s liberation by showcasing a Chinese female warrior to accentuate the image of strong women:

girls can be soldiers. Deep down, however, the film reinforces patriarchal family values, as can be discerned by comparing its conclusion with that of the poem, for how a story ends reveals its teller's social attitude. The Chinese version brings up the gender issue in its comic ending. Mulan, having returned to her family home with her comrades, puts on women's clothing and powders her face:

She came out to greet her companions,
And they were surprised:
"Being with you in battles for twelve years,
We had no idea that you are female."
The he-rabbit hurts his legs,
And the she-rabbit bewilders his eyes:
In the confusion of chaos,
How can he tell of her sex?

Noticeably, the poet is proud of Mulan for confusing her companions, and the soldiers themselves do not find her presence in the army to be offensive. Mulan's victory is a triumph over gender convention. Discussing female warriors, the Chinese literary historian Lu Da-Zhi comments, "It is unlikely that the story is all true, but back then, a Northern Chinese woman who fought battles in her armour could be thoroughly possible. As depicted in other folk songs at the time, such as 'Sister Li Po,' Northern women who rode and shot on horses were far braver and more skilful than many male soldiers of the declining Southern empire."¹ Lu's comment concurs with Chinese folk culture on the whole. Sexism exists in China, but traditional Chinese society discriminates against women in a fashion that differs from that featured in the Disney film. Confucian patriarchal codes presuppose a very strong division between social classes. Women are least constrained among the working class and "barbarians." As a result, Chinese folk culture is full of stories of female warriors and kung-fu masters such as Mulan, the Maidens of Yuen, and the Fourth Sister of Loi, among others. The characters in these stories are not always working class, but as folk tales, the stories are created by the working class.

Disney's Mulan, in contrast, is a confused girl pretending to be a soldier. Her decision to join the army reflects a quest to find herself as much as it does her love for her father. Moreover, she is unsuited for the traditional female role. Although she has a pretty face and a slim body, she can display none of the feminine accomplishments that will please the village matchmaker. Unlike her

character in the poem, Disney's *Mulan* does not return home at a break and voluntarily reveal her female identity. Instead, she is exposed after her cleverness and bravery bring victory; upon the discovery, her closed-minded commanding officer leaves her behind. Thus, she is forced to prove herself once again, and does so by rescuing the emperor. As is so common in Hollywood action movies, near catastrophe in war provides the circumstances for personal fulfillment.

But the film's apparent advocacy of individuality is no more than window dressing. True individuality threatens the commercial rules governing popular culture: if it is to be a blockbuster, a story must offend no one, and thus individualism must be approached cautiously. It can be celebrated when it concurs with the American dream – you can be anything you want if you work hard within society's established rules and expectations. But when individualism subverts society's general ideology – the nation's belief system that supports its economic and political structures – it becomes dangerous. *Mulan* may tempt postmodern critics to praise its celebration of border crossing, particularly when *Mulan* cross-dresses her fellow soldiers in order to infiltrate the captured Forbidden Palace, but in the end, it re-establishes all the borders it breaks down. To make the story fit into the formula of a Disneyfied fairy tale, the studio had to make sacrifices; the sacrificial ceremony in *Mulan* takes place during the family reunion that occurs at the conclusion of the film. Immediately after saving China, *Mulan* goes home alone and shows her father the medal she has received from the grateful emperor. As a loving father, he does not care about her achievements because the most important thing to him is her homecoming. Her handsome commanding officer, now her suitor, enters a moment later and is invited by her grandmother to stay for dinner. With Prince Charming now in place, the film closes on the obligatory happy note. However, the reality of *Mulan*'s future seems bleak – her “feminist” statement has been made; once made, it no longer carries any significance. Father and husband now give meaning to her existence. What the industry calls the balance between art and commerce, typically achieved through the extermination of individual rebellion, is established at the end of Disney's *Mulan*: patriarchy is restored to reinforce the family values of America's religious right. Gone is the Chinese poem's humorous blurring of gender boundaries.

I believe that mechanical adaptations of literature often produce dull movies. Films based on literature must not act as simple illustrations of literary texts, for film as an artistic medium has its own range of expression. Besides,

with a folk song such as “The Ballad of Mulan,” originality has little relevance. The existing form of the poem is such an artifact of rewriting that it is already far removed from its ancient forms. The poem states, for example, that Mulan receives the rank of “the Twelve Spheres,” which is a term from the T’ang Dynasty. We can therefore infer from the terminology that the episode of her promotion was constructed after at least a century of the poem’s oral transmission. The T’ang Dynasty had every reason to rewrite Mulan: it produced Wu Zetian (AD 625-705), the only Chinese empress, who took the throne of her husband’s declining empire and ignited a renaissance. In the Disney rewriting, *Mulan* materializes the conflict between the demand for strong female figures in media representation and the desire to restore patriarchal social order. The plot of *Mulan* offers a compromise: when the liberated warrior *chooses* to follow the way of her ancestors, slavery becomes freedom. Disney’s *Mulan* is problematic not because its script departs from the Chinese source text, but because it is a subversion of feminism in the name of feminism.

Mulan is a typical cultural product of the postfeminist age. Although the term “postfeminism” was once a “trendy little neologism,”² and is now a two-decade-old newspeak, it captures a general change of attitude toward feminism.³ In *Feminist Media Studies*, Liesbet van Zoonen describes a new generation stripped of the fabric of feminist politics:

Feminism nowadays is not easily delineated or defined. As a political project – at least in the context of continental western Europe – for the greater part its character has moved from a highly visible, vital and sometimes spectacular counter-cultural form to a customary but at times still controversial component of established institutions such as political parties, unions, universities and local and national administrations. Much contemporary feminism has taken on the form of women’s caucuses, women’s studies and women’s bureaux which often prefer to speak of their activities as “emancipatory” instead of “feminist.” A similar reluctance to associate with “feminism” seems to occur among women in their twenties who feel that feminism was a battle of their mothers or older sisters and claim that their own struggles are of a different kind.⁴

With Disney’s *Mulan* in mind, I find new meaning in van Zoonen’s remarks on the postfeminist age. Where do these young women get the feeling that feminism was a battle of their mothers? Are they led by euphemistic subversion in the broader culture to believe that the goal of feminism has been reached, or do

they identify with new kinds of political struggle that go beyond gender discourse? Every revolution has two possible deaths: by failing or by giving birth to a new age. Feminism did not fail; nevertheless, in the period following revolutionary times, those opposed to change commonly attempt to revive aspects of the pre-revolutionary world. Examples of this retrogression can be seen in the Roman universalization of Christianity, Bonapartist imperialism after the French Revolution, and proletarian dictatorship in communism. Similar retrogression dominates the postfeminist age, a phenomenon that Tania Modleski calls “feminism without women,” in the sense that the postfeminist world declares the triumph of feminism to prevent women from engaging in further discourses on social change.

To make its deceptive point that feminist struggle is no longer needed, the post-revolutionary world mocks the past to celebrate the present. In Disney’s *Mulan*, a prime example of feminism without women, China’s past is stolen to reinforce the American ideal. When the matchmaker meets Mulan, she comments that Mulan’s body is “too skinny” and therefore is “not good for bearing sons.” Viewers are expected to laugh because the developed world no longer uses women as breeding stock (at least we may tend to think so until, once in a while, we encounter something like the United States federal guidelines that suggest that the health care system “treat nearly all women as pre-pregnant”).⁵ Although Mulan may seem to rebel against ancient Chinese patriarchy, she is a feminist figure constructed to prevent any feminist consciousness of the present. Her body conforms to Hollywood’s beauty myth, which is responsible for the subjugation of contemporary women. Her triumph is manufactured through simulating and assimilating feminism and multiculturalism – a disguise that hides the retrogressive underpinnings of the film. For this reason, the movie follows one general rule of Hollywood films: The good, strong woman always returns to the man’s world.⁶ When Mulan defeats the Huns, her emperor recovers his power; when she returns home, her father retains the order of his house. Disney’s *Mulan* is a paradox: its political message contradicts its own poetic motive – its heroine is a transcendental postfeminist icon; its apparent cultural hybridity erases differences; its rebellious spirit dissolves its viewers’ subversive drives. As Modleski describes, “The postfeminist play with gender in which differences are elided can easily lead us back into our ‘pregendered’ past where there was only the universal subject – man.”⁷ The term “feminism” has lost its political edge; as seen in *Mulan*, or in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which were partially justified in the name

of liberating Islamic women, “feminism without women” manoeuvres deceptively, wrapping patriarchy in the trappings of feminism in order to fortify regressive power institutions.

FEMINIST FILM THEORY WITHOUT WOMEN-MADE FILMS

The realization of postfeminist subversion could have driven me to analyze popular culture throughout the rest of this book: Xena’s cleavage, the Powerpuff Girls’ “sugar, spice and everything nice,” Ally McBeal’s desperation for Mr. Right, Buffy’s desire to return to the life of an ordinary “girl” who enjoys shopping and cheerleading, all of *Sex in the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. However, not long after I saw *Mulan*, I was assigned to teach “Women and Film.” To avoid feminism without women, I wanted to exhibit films written and directed by women. While choosing a course textbook, I came across Sue Thornham’s *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*.⁸ In its collected essays, I observed an unanticipated trend: all of its theories are feminist, but male auteurs and their “silly movies” (as Pauline Kael would say) remain at centre stage, and women’s film art is literally out of the picture.⁹ All but one of the twenty-three collected essays focus on men’s films. Even the exception – Judith Butler’s “Gender Is Burning” – is similar to the others in terms of its critical position: questioning the validity of a white lesbian director making a documentary on black gay subculture, Butler uses the same critical spectatorship applied to male directors on the documentary film.¹⁰ *Feminist Film Theory* is a strange scenario of feminism without women. When the bulk of theoretical writing concentrates on tackling the patriarchal representational system, the critical enterprise falls into an abyss of negation, unintentionally sustaining the exile of women’s cinema that has existed since the beginning of film history. Had I patterned my course after the book, it would have focused on a list of films that varied from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* to Sylvester Stallone’s *Rocky II*.

Upon this realization, I recalled bell hooks’ wise words: “If we long to transform the culture so that the conventional mass media are not the only force teaching people what to like and how to see, then we have to embrace the avant-garde ... Here is where we’ll find radical possibility. We can deconstruct the images in the mainstream white supremacist capitalist patriarchal cinema for days and it will not lead to cultural revolution.”¹¹ Therefore, I turned my attention to women-*made* films to find “radical possibility” (even though neither the avant-garde nor women’s cinema guarantee the expression of “radical possibility”).

From a historical perspective, we may regard bell hooks' argument as a recapitulation of an early feminist call for the renewal of critical theory. In *Women and Film*, a pioneering though short-lived American journal of the early 1970s, the editors outline three forms of oppression of women in the film industry:¹²

- 1 Systemic discrimination: women are mostly employed as “receptionists, secretaries, odd job girls, prop girls,” and so on. The process of filmmaking itself excludes women by “an elitist hierarchy, destructive competition, and vicious internal politics.”
- 2 Cultural construction: the persistent projection of false images of women on the screen no matter how “liberal”-looking some characters appear, while in marketing, women are packaged as sex objects, victims of gangs, or vampires of horror stories.
- 3 Academic ignorance: male critics celebrate male auteurs, which further perpetuates the industry's male hierarchy, discouraging women from becoming production students and film professors.

Women and Film's editorial referred specifically to Hollywood, and with good reason. According to Barbara Koenig Quart, only 0.2 percent of all films released by American studios between 1949 and 1979 credited women in major filmmaking positions.¹³ Within this percentage, most were editors. Women had more success in editing because, unlike the Russians, who regarded montage as the essence of film art, Hollywood associated the task with women's patience and willingness to follow the given storyboards. Whatever the job, women felt that they were being pushed aside from positions demanding creative authority in the heyday of Hollywood. Joan Harrison, the screenwriter of *Rebecca*, told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1944 that “the front office attitude resents a woman in authority and it probably always will – they recognize women writers but prefer to keep us in prescribed grooves.”¹⁴ When she got tired of having her scripts changed and quit working for Hitchcock, she had to fight hard to become a producer of her own film noir, *Phantom Lady*, at Universal Studios. The system had room for female filmmakers, but sexism was the major barrier. In the seventies, therefore, second-wave feminism declared war on Hollywood. According to the *Women and Film* editorial, the feminist approach to film studies has three concentrations, corresponding to the three areas of oppression: first,

get more women to work in the industry as filmmakers; second, reveal how women have been distorted in cinematic representations; and, third, change the male-oriented critical heritage from within film studies. The three battle-fronts are supposed to be “inseparable.”

Regrettably, perhaps because film theory and film production are separate academic subjects, the former now concentrates primarily on criticism, and the latter has become a “practical” program of the professional school. What was called “formal” or “art” theory – hypotheses concerning the act of writing, the nature of film art, or the aesthetic principles of filmmaking – is no longer fashionable in the humanities. Contemporary theory and criticism are more concerned with politics than with poetics. So-called high theory is often employed to provide *critical* approaches. My argument is that, though it is important to continue developing theoretical frameworks for critical thinking, it is urgent to bridge the gap between poetics and politics. Otherwise, we will be left with feminism without women’s films, as exemplified by Sue Thornham’s *Feminist Film Theory*, a situation in which critical articles and books about women’s film art will be rarer than the women’s films allowed by the industry.

Nevertheless, high theory does not have to be criticism oriented. In poststructuralism’s European roots, for example, critical thinking is only a prelude to a revolution in poetic language. The works of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous exemplify how theory can be preoccupied with articulating feminine aesthetics and stimulating artistic experiments. Cixous borrows a story from Sun Tse’s *The Art of War* to illustrate a point. Once upon a time, the emperor asked Sun Tse to train his 180 wives to be soldiers. Sun Tse lined up the women in two rows and, using the language of the drumbeat, tried to teach them military drill: two beats turn right, three beats turn left, four beats about turn, and so on. The king’s wives did not follow the beats. They fell about laughing. The masculine economy, Cixous describes, is like soldiers marching in synchronized left, right, left steps; the laws of classical physics are the logic of masculine economy. The feminine, in contrast, has no such rhythm. What, then, is the rhythm of femininity? It is not anything specific: rather, it is what refuses to conform to a fixed structure. It is an otherness that does not know efficiency and does not follow orders; it cannot help but laugh at the demand for formality and obedience. Masculinity describes the characteristics of domination, of what it values, and how it rules. From the masculine viewpoint, femininity is disorder and chaos, weakness and unpredictability. For Cixous, radical creative energy relies on freeing femininity from the repressive masculine gaze.

Although Cixous' theory encourages women's artistic expression, feminine aesthetics is not limited to women only. After all, Cixous herself employed the term "feminine writing" (*l'écriture féminine*) to analyze Joycean language in her doctoral thesis *The Exile of James Joyce*. She advocates "feminine writing" as a political act. In her famous essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," she proposes, "I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement."¹⁵ For Cixous, unlike the Anglo-postfeminist culture that demands girl fighters like Disney's *Mulan*, the attempt to make a soldier out of a woman is considered an act of violent silencing. As *The Art of War* continues, Sun Tse warned the women that those who failed to follow his orders would be punished with death. They laughed again. A man of his word, Sun Tse beheaded two of them and started over. Ancient wisdom supports modern psychology: fearing decapitation (an anxiety similar to the castration complex identified by Freud for the male), the women obeyed the drumbeat and marched without making a single mistake, in silence.¹⁶ Conformity is tragic in Cixous' narration.

Cixous' theory is literally *feminine-ism*; femininity is a creative force in both women and men, which, once extricated, can be engaged to resist the power of social conformity and the informatics of domination.¹⁷ To create radical possibilities through art, the artist must try to shake the ground of language. Like Sun Tse's drumbeats, language (or the "symbolic order" in poststructural terminology) is a tool of conformity. From the moment we begin to acquire language, it shapes our minds deep in the unconscious. Once a soldier is trained to march, the drumbeats will always be associated with obedience. In Cixous' argument, therefore, the artist must reject the established structure, the left, right, left masculine symbolic order; radical political ideas require feminine aesthetics to bypass the decapitation threat presented by the established symbolic order. Feminine aesthetics, therefore, is like laughter – an absurd response to absurd authority. One must find the courage to laugh so that the heart does not follow the drum.

Like Cixous, Laura Mulvey is deeply interested in women's artistic expression; however, she is known mainly for her critique of the "male gaze." In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey employs psychoanalysis as a political weapon to expose the hidden gender politics of men's cinematic language. But

the critique of visual pleasure in Mulvey's argument is not an end. For instance, she begins with a crucial Lacanian question that touches the heart of poststructuralism: "How to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of arrival of language) while still caught within the language of patriarchy?"¹⁸ For Mulvey, critical consciousness precedes artistic experimentation. The main theme of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is the "destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon." Narrative structure and visual composition go hand in hand in the cinematic tradition to fulfill the pleasure of looking, which is, for the male, the voyeuristic gaze, and, for the female, submission to the role of "to-be-looked-at-ness."¹⁹ An alternative woman's image within the convention of classical cinema can hardly break the code of gender in which women remain the object of desire for the male gaze. The stylistic tradition of classical narrative cinema itself reinforces a power structure by providing the erotic pleasures of voyeurism (an idea certainly confirmed by the physical attractiveness of postfeminist girl fighters). Through psychoanalysis, Mulvey believes, feminist critics can bring the unconscious encoding of mainstream cinema to the surface and thus shrivel its power in the glare of light.

The drive for feminist filmmaking is explicitly expressed (though not elaborated) in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema": Mulvey believes "there is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides" (ibid., 15). In her subsequent writings and filmmaking, Mulvey actually tried to move away from the destruction of pleasure toward the construction of feminine film aesthetics. Shortly after writing "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," she co-directed *Penthesilea* (1974) and *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) with Peter Wollen. Later, in "Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde," a 1978 essay written for the Oxford Women's Studies Committee, Mulvey summed up the forces preceding the poststructural movement: "Both film theory and feminism, united by a common interest in the politics of images and problems of aesthetic language, have been influenced by recent intellectual debates around the split nature of the sign (semiotics) and the eruption of the unconscious in representation (psychoanalysis). There has also been a definite influence from Louis Althusser's Marxist philosophy, especially his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.'"²⁰ Each component of these three intellectual debates has its function: Marxist philosophy provides the framework for ideological criticism to make "the attack on sexism" possible; psychoanalysis reveals that conventional cinematic

language is dominated by the male point of view and, along with it, the projection of fears and fantasies of the male psyche; semiotics focuses the attack specifically on language, claiming that language, as the building block of thought, needs radical change. Semiotics gives hope to feminine writing, suggesting that if we study the smallest details of language, we can find traces of what has been submerged in the process of meaning making – thus, every homogeneous male-dominant cultural product cleaves to reveal a hidden maternal plenitude. Seizing on this key idea years before Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* was widely discussed among Anglo-American academics, Mulvey had already made use of Kristeva's poetics – “transgression is played out through language itself” – to support feminist experimental films.²¹

Perhaps due to the criticism-based paradigm of Anglo-American universities, Mulvey's later writings, together with her advocacy of women's cinema and the complex debate concerning the nature of feminine aesthetics, were overlooked and eventually overshadowed by other critical theories. Many anthologies of theory, including *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* and *Feminist Film Theory*, present “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” as the foundational essay of feminist spectatorship, but omit other discussions of alternative cinema. I believe that the downplaying of Mulvey's avant-gardism is symptomatic of feminist film theory without women filmmakers. In the eighties, feminist film theory took two different paths: one furthered the use of psychoanalysis to destroy male voyeuristic pleasure, and the other attacked academia itself. In both cases, avant-garde cinema was either ignored or attacked – attacked because a rising interest in mass culture, accompanied by a theory of cultural negotiations, perceived avant-gardism and the criticism of popular culture as elitist intellectual amusement.

The principal flashpoints of this theory appear in the work of Valerie Walkerdine and Christine Gledhill. The latter states, “While the political avant-garde audience deconstructs the pleasures and identities offered by the mainstream text, it participates in the comforting identity of critic or *cognoscente*, positioned in the sphere of ‘the ideologically correct,’ and the ‘radical’ – a position which is defined by its difference from the ideological mystification attributed to the audiences of the mass media.”²² Instead of reading films as an ideological apparatus, and its consumers as cybernetic drones, Gledhill maintains that meaning making is a process of cultural negotiations: “As a model of meaning production, negotiation conceives cultural exchange as the intersection of processes of production and reception, in which overlapping but

non-matching determinations operate. Meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience.”²³ In a sense, Gledhill makes use of feminist film theory’s own analytic weapons to disintegrate the intellectual pride of the avant-garde. Culture is dynamic, so critics should not assume a position outside and above the public from which to cast the gaze of critical pleasure.

Gledhill’s view is supported by Walkerdine, who takes the anti-intellectual motive further. “The crusade to save the masses from the ideology that dupes them,” Walkerdine warns, “can obscure the real social significance of their pleasures and, at the same time, blind us to the perversity of radical intellectual pleasures.” The attempt to measure culture in fixed pathological terms is, according to her, “a perversion.” Her interest is in schoolgirl fiction, particularly that of the working class; she observes that one fatal problem of poststructural theory lies in its elitist longing for high arts. She regards “the cold aesthetic of counter-cinema” as a tool of “embourgeoisement,” and therefore defends mainstream cinema in the conclusion of “Video Replay: Families, Films and Fantasy”: “Watching a Hollywood movie is not simply an escape from drudgery into dreaming: it is a place of desperate dreaming, of hope for transformation.”²⁴

But, as we see in *Mulan*, the products of mass culture are often ideologically retrogressive. Although *Mulan* at least tries to look “pro-feminist,” many movies simply project feminism as outright madness and evil. Cruella de Vil, epitomy of the evil, angry feminist in the 1996 version of *101 Dalmatians*, is such an example. De Vil’s hair stands up aggressively, recalling the mythic figure of Medusa – as a matter of fact, the men around her are always stiff in her presence. Anita, the film’s good-girl figure, works for Cruella as a fashion designer. Through their conversation, the film orchestrates an overtly anti-feminist message:

Cruella: How long have you been working for me?

Anita: Uh, two years last August.

Cruella: And you have done wonderful work [in] that time.

Anita: Ah ... Thank you.

Cruella: I don’t see you socially, do I?

Anita: No.

Cruella: And you are not very well-known despite your obvious talent.

Anita: Well, notoriety doesn't mean very much to me.

Cruella: Your work is fresh and clean, unfettered, unpretentious. It sells. And one of these days my competitors are going to suss out who you are, and they're going to try to steal you away.

Anita: Oh, no. If I left, it wouldn't be for another job.

Cruella: Oh, really? What would it be for?

Anita: Well, I don't know. Um ... If I met someone. If working here didn't fit in with our plans.

Cruella: Marriage!

Anita: Perhaps.

Cruella: More good women have been lost to marriage than to war, famine, disease and disaster. You have talent, darling, don't squander it.

Anita: Well, I don't think that it's something we have to worry about. I don't have any prospects.

Cruella: Thank God.

In the 1961 animated version of *101 Dalmatians*, Cruella is Anita's manipulative, psychotic former classmate. The script offers no explanation for Cruella's wealth or her relationship with Anita. Her cruelty is manifested in her obsession with furs. She is full of hate but not deadly; she is not exactly a femme fatale because she is neither seductive nor competent. She is a comic antagonist. In the 1996 remake, the *new* Cruella is transformed into an evil feminist, reinforcing the Hollywood perception that feminism is devilish for hating men and traditional families. This version explains why Cruella goes to such great lengths to get Anita's dogs: it is in revenge for Anita's betrayal of the feminist tyrant.

The widespread negative image of strong women has the power to construct its illusionary "Truth." In reviewing *The Break-Up* (2006), Johanna Schneller observes a phenomenon of "shrieking shrews": "The joke in Hollywood used to be that there were three roles for actresses: ingénue, mom and Miss Daisy. Well, there's now a fourth, but it's hardly cause for rejoicing: Bitch Boss to a younger, comelier woman (who is often less talented, but a bigger star)."²⁵ Schneller's list of Bitch Bosses includes Judy Davis in *The Break-Up*, Sharon Stone in *Catwoman*, Helen Mirren in *Raising Helen*, Glenn Close in *Height*, Diane Keaton in *Hanging Up*, and Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*. One need look no further to understand why many of today's young women are reluctant to label themselves "feminists."

I sympathize with Gledhill and Walkerdine in their attempt to speak against intellectual elitists' simplification of popular culture as trash and propaganda. In examining commercial products such as *Mulan* and *101 Dalmatians*, one must keep in mind that such films are ideologically multi-layered because their texts arise from cultural negotiations corresponding to the complex social reality beyond the silver screen. Nevertheless, what "cultural negotiation" can we have in a cultural climate that regards film viewers as mass consumers? The need to study mass culture does not override the call for alternatives and experimentation.

In *Reel to Real*, bell hooks recalls from her teaching experiences that movies can often open up discussions of race, class, and gender more effectively than do theory and criticism. In the same chapter, however, she also argues that one must embrace the avant-garde to find alternatives. Her argument recapitulates that of Mulvey. We are invited to look toward the artists to find visions that have been missing from our cultural discourse. But hooks is not alone. Since the mid-1990s, interest in women's creative forces has grown, and many extensive works now acknowledge the rich resource of women's cinema. For example, Patricia Mellencamp's *A Fine Romance: Five Ages of Film Feminism* (1995) is pioneering in its attempt to map the development of filmmaking under different feminisms. There are also such encyclopedic projects as Amy Unterburger's *The St. James Women Filmmakers Encyclopedia* (1999). In addition, Pam Cook and Ginette Vincendeau conduct an editorial series titled "Women Make Cinema" for Continuum International Publishing.

One important lesson that we can learn from these encyclopedias and histories of women's cinema is that, though 0.2 percent is a small number, women's contributions to film art have been magnificent. As long ago as 1896, Alice Guy was the first person to realize the potential of film as a storytelling medium in a time when everyone else was using the moving picture to shoot "live action" – cars running back and forth, women walking out of factories, trains pulling into stations. Employed as a stenographer for Léon Gaumont, Guy imagined that motion pictures could tell fictional stories. Under the condition that she did her "silly girl thing" only during her leisure time, Guy was allowed to use the Gaumont Studio to produce, in 1896, the first commercially released narrative film.²⁶ In the following years, she was the Gaumont company's creative spirit, writing and directing her own films seventy years before the term "*cinéma d'auteur*" was invented to describe her position. Early in 1915, Julia Crawford Ivers became the first female general manager of a Hollywood studio,

and, at Universal Studios, Lois Weber was the highest-paid director of her day (US\$5,000 per week). From 1927 to 1949, Hollywood's dark age for female filmmakers, the industry still produced the celebrated director Dorothy Arzner. In 1967, Dede Allen, recognized for her excellent editing of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, became the first editor to receive a solo credit. In 1972, when the editorial in *Women and Film* was written, Elaine May's *A New Leaf* had been out for less than a year and *Heartbreak Kid* had been released. Beyond the border of Hollywood studios were even greater names such as Lina Wertmüller, Muriel Box, Marguerite Duras, Agnès Varda, Shirley Clarke, and Sarah Maldoror. Indeed, in 1972, when feminist film theory was still in its infancy, there were enough female filmmakers for New York to hold the first International Festival of Women's Film.

Currently, gender-motivated discourse based on the binary opposition of the sexes has gone out of fashion. But the deconstruction of binary oppositions does not signal the end of feminism: we have just come to realize that sexual politics has a larger context. When feminism started its fight against the oppression of women, its discourse was motivated by the war of the sexes. As the movement continued, it eventually included other dichotomies – masculine and feminine, gay and straight, rich and poor, black and white, local and global, natural and cultural, monocultural and multicultural. For this reason, feminism has grown into new prominence, joining other political movements to cultivate multiple levels of diversity in a context of neo-colonialism and global monopoly. The new streams in feminist scholarship (be they called “post-feminism” in the word's best sense or “third-wave feminism”) are well elaborated in Angharad N. Valdivia's essay “Feminist Media Studies in a Global Setting.”²⁷ The shift from the “binary” to the “diverse” is the new wave.

To a certain degree, I appreciate the postfeminist argument that we need to deconstruct “gender” as an artificial category, because, after all, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, “people are different from each other.”²⁸ Why do we need to distinguish men's cinema from women's? Unlike Tania Modleski, however, I do not think that the intent to dissolve gender discourse is a feminist advancement that undermines women's struggles in other parts of the world. Everyone is constantly revising – challenging, dismantling, establishing – boundaries of cultural identity; recognizing this endless change, one may realize that “culture” and “identity” are in themselves terms to be continually defined and re-defined. What is “women” as a cultural construct? Even if we limit our discussion to sexuality and physiology, the answer would not be black and white. If the

boundaries that we have constructed are so obscure and unstable, how can we speak of “women’s cinema”? What motivates us to create such a category as “women filmmakers”? Are there essential characteristics of women’s filmmaking? When Douglas Rowe praised Mimi Leder for adding the “woman’s touch” to her sci-fi action movie *Deep Impact*, Leder commented that, though she certainly brought her own individuality to her crew, characterizing the “woman’s touch” as sensitive and tender would not be fair to “the man who directed *Terms of Endearment* and the man who directed *Schindler’s List* and the man who directed *Cinema Paradiso*.”²⁹ On the one hand, as I am going to explain through Pauline Kael’s definition of the art of criticism, good critical practice is supposed to help others see what is new and important in every film; any attempt to generalize in essential terms – whether through citing “director’s touch” or “woman’s touch” – is a mistake. On the other hand, however, I support the feminist project of refocusing on women filmmakers; the categorization is certainly motivated by gender discourse, but it is necessary for the time being because women’s cinema, no matter how we draw the boundaries, includes a wide range of works that are not fully appreciated and studied.

With the recognition of this paradox, I treat “women’s cinema” in this book as an existential practice rather than an essential definition. I concentrate on women’s metafictional films – stories about storytelling and films about filmmaking – to derive a theoretical practice from women filmmakers and scriptwriters. I hope to demonstrate that women’s filmmaking can provide an active voice of imagination; far from shrieking, this active voice can help me and others find rhythms for the film art that are not synchronized with the drumbeats of our cultural and political domination. In the postfeminist era, it is more imperative than ever to engage women’s filmmaking, not only as oppositional gaze, but also as howling for multitudes.

THE BALLAD OF MULAN

(This folk poem was composed between AD 420 and 589; the version used for this translation was written down and revised around the eighth century.)

Tsi-ek, and tsi-ek,
Mulan was weaving.
The shuttle suddenly stopped,
And Mulan sighed.
“What are you thinking?
What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing really,
I don’t know what to think.
Last night I read the order.
The king is calling many troops.
He sent out twelve scrolls,
And every one has my father’s name.
The old man has no grown-up son,
And I have no elder brother.
I want to get my horse and saddle,
And serve in the army in his place.”

East, she took a horse,
West, a saddle,
South, a bridle,
North, a whip.
At dawn, she left her parents,
At dusk, she camped on the riverbank,
Where she could no longer hear her parents’ calls,
Only the roaring of Yellow River’s stormy waves filled her ears.

The next day, she departed the Yellow River,
At dusk, she reached Black Mountain,
Where she could no longer hear her parents’ calls,
Only the neighing of Mount Yen’s wild mares filled her ears.

She fought her way through ten thousand miles,
Speeding over mountain gates.
Chill winds spread the odour of blood,
Cold sun polished her iron armour.
Countless perished in countless wars,
Yet warriors returned after many falls.

On her way back, she met the king,
Who sat in his gleaming palace.
He honoured her with the Twelve Spheres,
And granted her a thousand treasures.
He asked her what she desired.
“I don’t want any high post,
but to ride a swift mount
Which will take me home.”

When Father and Mother heard her,
They came out to greet the great warrior.
When Elder Sister heard her,
She stayed in to adorn herself.
When Little Brother heard her,
He whet the blade for mutton and pork.

“East, I unlock my gate,
West, I uncover my bench,
Undo my wartime robe,
Unpack my old-time clothes.”
Looking out the window she combed her hair,
Looking into the mirror she powdered her face.

She came out to greet her companions,
And they were surprised:
“Being with you in battles for twelve years,
We had no idea that you are female.”
The he-rabbit hurts his legs,
And the she-rabbit bewilders his eyes:
In the confusion of chaos,
How can he tell of her sex?

TRANSLATED BY HOI F. CHEU