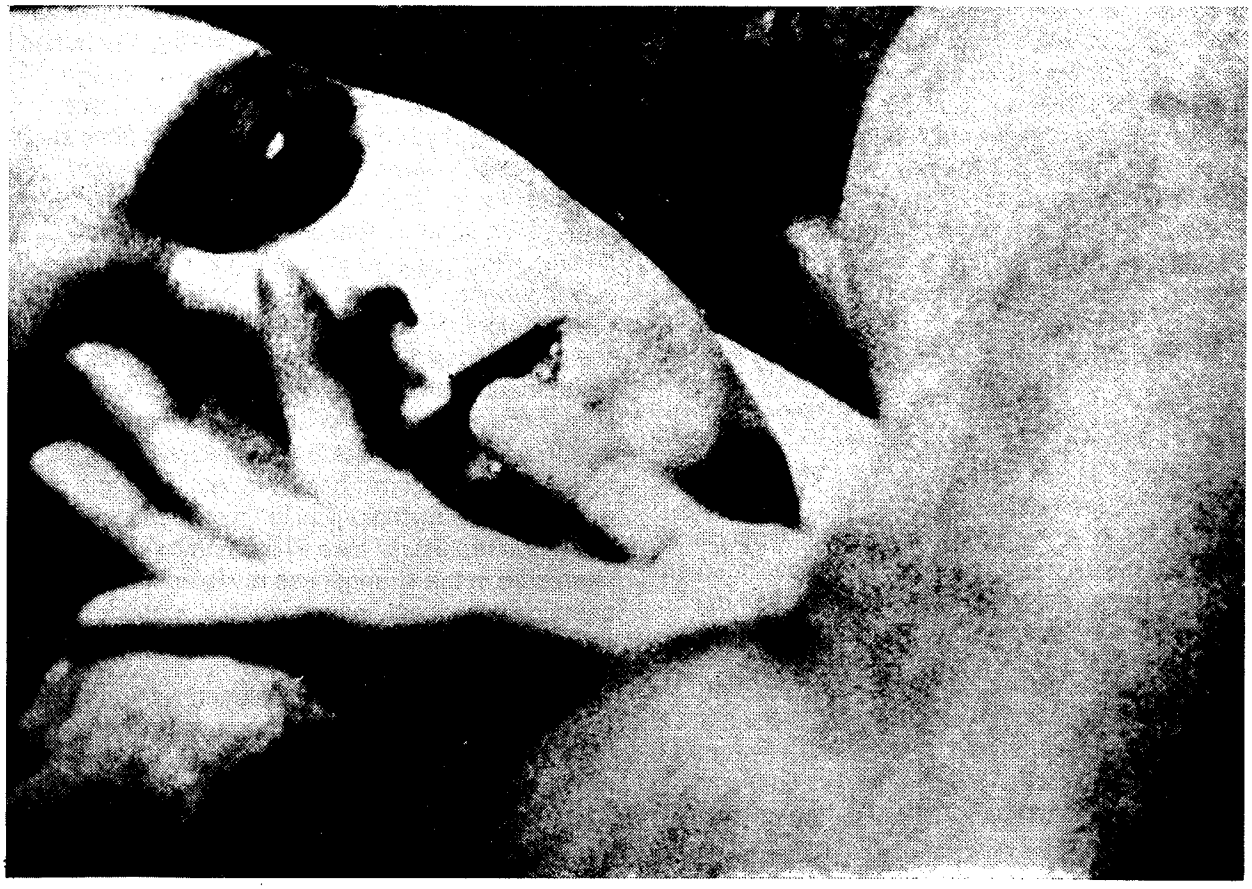

Magdalena Viraga: Story of a Red Sea Crossing by Nina Menkes

DIFFICULT LANGUAGE: NOTES ON INDEPENDENT CINEMA BY WOMEN IN THE EIGHTIES
By BERENICE REYNAUD

> Should a film whose main project is to restore the voice and subjectivity of a previously ignored or suppressed person or segment of the population...contain argument, contradiction, or express the director's ambivalence...? Obviously, we can't afford to be prescriptive about this.
>
> –Yvonne Rainer[1]

What does it mean, in 1988, to be writing about films by women? And what does it mean, in the context of this retrospective, to be writing about "independent cinema?" One can be certain, in both cases, to run into a set of unresolved contradictions. To answer the first question—after having mentioned that, of 117 filmmakers represented in the retrospective, forty-two are women (a rare occurrence in this sort of event)—I will say that films by women do not necessarily mean "feminist movies." To answer the second question, I will assume the word "independent" is used to signify the loss of consensus on phrases like "avant-garde," or "experimental," or "new cinema:" they seem to have become as passé as the word "feminist" itself, which is indicative of a double crisis. "I am not making avant-garde films," or "My movies are not feminist" is a form of denial often heard coming from filmmakers who are fighting just to be able to continue to make movies. It is not only that "making avant-garde work" or "being a feminist" is a position untenable at a commercial level, but also, and maybe more importantly, that traditional avant-garde and middle-class feminism have solidified into institutions and practices that are more repressive than liberating.

One of the ironies of the American avant-garde has been that, while acknowledging Maya Deren as its origin and/or main source of inspiration, it eventually became a field of expression for the male

self—if not the macho artist. No matter how "wild" the experiments of the traditional avant-garde filmmakers, they always pre-supposed a "locus classicus,"[2] an unquestioned center, a subject that precluded "otherness;" and so it is no wonder that women felt excluded from the movement.[3]

It is within this context that the revolutionary aspect of Yvonne Rainer's cinema should be perceived. While her dance work was clearly embedded in a solid avant-garde tradition, she came to the conclusion that "dancing could no longer encompass or 'express' the new content of [her] work, i.e. the emotions."[4] Instead of promoting a straightforward "exploration of the female self," Rainer introduced shifts in meaning, even when she was handling "what at first seemed like blatantly personal and private material." (ibid). Later she commented:

> One way [my work] is saved from being autobiographical, or *merely* personal, however, is by being so frequently pushed into the realm of fiction. Which is where cliche comes in. The degree to which I can interject the familiar—in language, artifact, and reference—is the degree to which the purely personal factor in the work can be offset and distanced.... References to others' work function in the same way... [and] relieve *my* work of the danger of insularity and solipsism.[5]

With such "manipulations," she introduces the question of "Who speaks?" as well as notions of "split subject" and "intertextuality," which are at the heart of the avant-garde.

The extreme modernity of Rainer's work, the sense of risk that keeps it constantly on the cutting edge, is exemplified by her openness to the currents of contemporary thought: her films are a direct—if highly mediated—version of her readings and, in the last fifteen years, her intellectual interests have grown to encompass a growing social awareness (*Kristina Talking Pictures,* 1976), advanced leftist politics (*Journeys From Berlin/1971,* 1980), semiotics, feminist film theory and social activities in New York (*The Man Who Envied Women*, 1986). The particular strength of her movies, however, lies in an original blending of formal strategies and "content." Expanding the critical approach of "character" and "performance" she had developed as a choreographer, Rainer has, in all of her films, split her main character(s) into several performers, destroying the illusion of realism and inviting the spectator to find his/her own context to relate to the words on the sound track. In *The Man Who Envied Women*, the burden of representing the title character, Jack Deller (for "tell her...") is shared by two actors. Moreover, the man's discourse is almost entirely made up of quotations: from Raymond Chandler's letters, Michel Foucault's texts, speeches of various New York intellectuals, and classic American movies of the 1940's. To the redundant visual presence of this self-satisfied man, Rainer contrasts the discourse of an invisible woman. Taking literally (but with a grain of salt) feminist film theories that, in narrative films, woman's position is constantly reinstated for the consummation or frustration of male desire,"[6] she does *not* show her heroine. The latter, remaining a disembodied voice "pursuing, nagging, questioning,...is never caught with her pants down" (ibid, p. 15), which puts her, paradoxically, in a situation of power. With *The Man Who Envied Women*, Rainer continues to make a feminist questioning possible within an avant-garde film setting.

No small feat. For feminism itself has been criticized as oppressive. By lesbian filmmakers, who feel rejected by the "heterocentrism" of "the paralysing paradigms of a feminist cultural theory in which historical diagnoses have tended to harden into prescriptive dogmas (e.g. that the gaze is inevitably voyeuristic, exploitative and male, that fetishistic modes of producing meaning are absolutely unavailable to women, at any rate, to femininity, etc...)."[7] By women of color, who are aware that "feminism is still predominantly a white movement and, as such, unfortunately still subject to racism."[8] By younger women, who do not find in traditional feminism an articulation of their concerns and professional interests. And even among filmmakers still claiming to be feminists, who represent a large diversity of theories, beliefs, and ideologies.

It would be interesting, for example, to compare Nina Menkes's *Magdalena Viraga* to Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986). While both filmmakers are interested in using prostitution as a

metaphor/metonymy for the "impasse" created by sexual difference, Menkes anchors her fiction in her search for a spirituality that is not male-dominated:

> As a woman, if you are situated as "other" in reference to the main culture, you have to reach for different, more spiritual things. In a way, you're enriched by that quest, but at the same time it brings a terrible loneliness.[9]

Menkes's quest for the "locked voice" of women leads her to look for new, truly experimental modes of expression. *Magdalena Viraga*, her first feature, is structured around nine harrowing scenes in which the heroine, Ida, is in bed with her various johns. Her face is shown in close-up, while the man's head, neck and naked torso rhythmically enter and leave the frame. The static shot is held for a quasi-unbearable length of time, communicating to the viewer Ida's boredom, discomfort, and despair. During one of the sessions, Ida looks up at the ceiling. On the plaster of the cheap hotel room is painted an icon of a smiling Christ; an ironic reworking of a worn-out cliché, but also a witty reminder that the real plot is played between Ida and Christ, Ida and God, not Ida and the pathetic man who crushes her body. Like a visual poem, alternating static shots of breathtaking composition and moments of violence, Menkes's film presents the condition of prostitute—the "bad girl," guilty of being born a woman, the bitch, the witch, the repentant sinner in the Christian iconography, the perennial victim—as a vehicle to express female alienation.[10]

Although Leslie Thornton's work is informed by a more classical feminist film theory (she teaches in the Semiotics Department at Brown University), she shares a similar pain of being a woman, a similar difficulty in communicating this pain. Significantly, the title of her major completed film to date, *Adynata,* denotes a "confession that words fail us"—and I will add that, in Thornton's world, images fail us, too, as they simultaneously entrap and seduce us. So it will be *between images*, in the silence between words, in the gaps created by her impressive accumulation of collaged material, that the filmmaker will look for new ways of expressing her voice, her "otherness."

Adynata starts with two black-and-white photographs of a Chinese dignitary and his family; taken in 1861 by an English traveler, we are led to question the way the mandarin's wife is portrayed: a "China doll" with bound feet and modest gait, staring silently at nothing. Described by the filmmaker as "vulgar tourism of the Other," *Adynata* is a meditation on the linguistic and physical codes (exotic make-up, feminine garment, bound feet, embroidered slippers, metaphorical equation between women and flowers, fascination for the enclosed world of Japanese gardens, Turkish harems and despotic labyrinths, etc.) which construct "the woman"[11] as an Other in a position of subjection. The film suggests women's ambivalence (repulsion/complicity) for these embellished representations of their own oppression. The sound-track is an imaginative potpourri of onomatopoeias (the language of a mythical "madwoman"—the ultimate Other), Chinese operas, music lifted from *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and TV shows, Latin American songs, Betty Boop's voice, etc. This collage of exotic quotations weaves ambiguous figures both hiding and revealing the true meaning of "otherness," encompassing its own alienation and banality in cultural clichés. To quote Marguerite Duras, *Adynata* attempts to "translate darkness" into seductive images of an unattainable—and fake—Orient, to give words to a hitherto unspoken silence.

Shot in black-and-white, Chick Strand's *Soft Fiction* begins with beautiful, sensual images of a woman in extreme close-up. An attractive woman in her forties reads a letter addressed to Strand by another, unnamed woman, who relates with frankness, humor, and a bit of bashfulness an erotic episode with four cowboys at a rodeo. Then, while a younger woman in the nude is seen cooking and eating breakfast in a sunny kitchen, the radio plays a female voice whispering an erotic confession. A third woman talks about her "promiscuous youth" in Paris, her painful involvement with a man in New York, and her subsequent drug addiction. After a soprano's rendering of Strauss's *Death and the Maiden*, a fourth confession follows. Shot in close-up, a middle-aged woman tells of growing up in Jewish Poland as a girl during the war, and how soldiers came to get her with her entire family and her kittens. She recalls climbing a hill, "and then, there is a blank." There is a cut, followed by the image of yet another woman playing with water, walking barefoot on the beach, and dancing. The film successfully creates an atmosphere where the voices of these women can be heard, not only in relation to images of the