

MULTIPLE
VOICES
IN
FEMINIST
FILM
CRITICISM

Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch, editors



University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis
London

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
2037 University Avenue Southeast, Minneapolis, MN 55455-3092
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Multiple voices in feminist film criticism / Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch, editors.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8166-2272-8.—ISBN 0-8166-2273-6 (pbk.)

1. Women in motion pictures. 2. Feminist film criticism. I. Carson, Diane. II. Dittmar, Linda, 1938-. III. Welsch, Janice R.
PN1995.9.W6M32 1994
791.43'015'082—dc20

93-13743

CIP

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Psychoanalysis and Feminist Film Theory: The Problem of Sexual Difference and Identity

Janet Walker

Author's note: This article was written in Paris in 1981. As such it reflects contemporary feminist film theory's concentration on European feminist perspectives, a concentration that has intensified in the intervening years as French feminist work, in particular, has become more plentiful and accessible through English translation.¹ Happily, the early impulse (examined in part III of this article) to study problems of female spectatorship and sexual and cultural identity as problems pertinent to cultural representation seen historically has developed significantly and might be pursued in the writings of feminist media scholars Patrice Petro, Tania Modleski, Maureen Turim, Constance Penley, and Diane Waldman, among many others.² For an excellent overview of contemporary feminist work on film and television see "The Spectatrix," *Camera Obscura*, nos. 20-21 (May-September 1989).

This article provides an overview of how psychoanalytic thought has been applied to feminist film theory in order to pursue questions of women's material and imagistic oppression and to imagine possibilities for women's liberation. I have divided my discussion into three areas to chart the development and variations in psychoanalytic applications. The first area to be discussed concerns the use of psychoanalysis to explain the irrevocably patriarchal nature of the constitution of sexual difference and identity and

its reinforcement in filmic representation. The second application environments a psychoanalysis in which femininity is problematized and in which the gaps and lacunae within (primarily Freudian) psychoanalytic theory become the site of the (missing) formulation of feminine psychic structures. Hollywood films, under this view, may be interrogated for subversive moments when a given film's "unconscious" surfaces in the form of heretofore repressed femininity, or moments when the film presents contradictory notions of the feminine. A third application of psychoanalysis to film studies emphasizes the potential of psychoanalysis to address the cultural as well as the psychological register. This application has as its goal the understanding of the place of women in cultural representation as neither absent nor totally repressed or punished, but rather underappreciated by theoreticians whose thinking has been constructed precisely through psychoanalytic processes.

To Illuminate Patriarchal Oppression

Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is the touchstone article in the field of feminism, psychoanalysis, and film.³ Not only does "Visual Pleasure" mount an uncompromising feminist critique of cinematic representation, but it links psychoanalytic processes and cinema spectatorship by more than the previously explored "film as dream" metaphor. Using concepts of scopophilic voyeurism and scopophilic narcissism, Mulvey explores how the psychological processes that constitute and govern psychosexual identity also enable the pleasure of cinema spectatorship.

The fascinating world of the cinema screen is exhibited and, for the spectator alone in the dark, it is also private. Thus, cinema engages what Freud, in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), described as scopophilia: the pleasure in subjecting others to a curious, controlling gaze. But, argues Mulvey, cinema also engages narcissistic scopophilia, described by Freud in *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes* (1915). In this incarnation, "the wish to look intermingl[es] with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings."⁴ Thus, scopophilic pleasure in taking another person as a sexual object is identified as one essential psychic process involved in cinematic spectatorship. Processes of identification and the constitution of the ego make up the second half of the pair.

However, these processes of psychosexuality and identity construction are imbalanced across the sexes. The male is the active "bearer of the look," where the female is the passive object of the look. "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance," writes Mulvey, "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female." Applied to cinema spectat-

ing, then, and in particular the films of Alfred Hitchcock, it is only the male spectator in his identification with the camera and the male actors, his surrogate, who gains pleasure in looking, while the female performer "connotes to-be-looked-at-ness."⁵

And yet this process is not so straightforward. First, identification with a male protagonist is inherently problematic because such identification reanimates what Jacques Lacan has described as the "misrecognition" that takes place in infancy during the mirror stage when the infant sees in his own reflection a more discrete and capable physical being than is actually the case. Second, both voyeuristic scopophilia and narcissistic scopophilia are defenses against the male's recognition of his own limitations, which recognition threatens all the more acutely when a "castrated" being, the woman according to the man's view, comes into focus:

The woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the *film noir*); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence over-valuation, the cult of the female star).⁶

Filmic representation in classical Hollywood cinema, then, is predicated on the patriarchally required denial of sexual difference. Films that seem to offer alternatives by allowing a certain openness suggested by the *femme fatale* or the spectacular image of, say, Marlene Dietrich in the films of Josef von Sternberg, in fact only allow this openness to the extent that it is predicated on closure. The feminine position is, by definition, inaccessible.

Mulvey carefully foregrounds her own use of psychoanalytic theory as "a political weapon." In response to feminists who suggest that Mulvey's formulation reiterates the oppression she is set to struggle against, Mulvey may reply that psychoanalysis is used in her piece as a *description* of society and not as a naturalized *prescription*. And yet, Mulvey's recruitment of psychoanalytic theory into the service of its own critique seems to me only partly realized. The view of psychoanalysis and that of Hollywood cinema seem overly monolithic and unable to account for the spaces of female resistance that give rise, for example, to classical film texts that depart in places from the model, to radically other sorts of pleasurable filmic representation, and even to critical writing such as Mulvey's own.

What Does a Woman Want?

The great question that has never been answered and which I have not yet been able to answer despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is "What does a woman want?"

*Freud, to Marie Bonaparte*⁷

If Mulvey's piece is representative of a feminist critique of patriarchy that turns on the recognition and analysis of the impossibility of the female position, another body of critical writings takes as its point of departure Freud's question, "What does a woman want?" But, there can be little smoothness or closure in an argument resting on such a volatile notion as female pleasure. Thus, theoretical work in this realm, in contradistinction to the solid critique of patriarchal representation described above, establishes itself as being of *necessary* tentative, unfinished, and inherently problematic. Freud's question is asked, but remains partially unanswered.

Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose both excavate Freud's work for evidence of his dissatisfaction with his own formulations of femininity.⁸ Rose points out that from 1923, with "The Infantile Genital Organization: An Interpolation into the Theory of Sexuality," to 1933, with "Femininity," Freud talks about nothing as much as he talks about sexual difference.⁹ Unsatisfied, he returns to his early ideas in *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-1895) and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).¹⁰ In "Femininity" (1933) Freud makes the following inconclusive remark: "That is all I had to say to you about femininity. It is certainly incomplete and fragmentary and does not always sound friendly."¹¹

In order to avoid naturalizing the male as "having" the phallus and the female as "lacking" the phallus (the trap that threatens to snare Mulvey), Rose emphasizes that the boy has often *seen* that his mother does not have a penis, without really *noticing*. The observation becomes significant only when social taboos begin to function, enacting the threat of castration if the boy continues to desire his mother. The sight, then, is meaningless outside of *social difference*, and gender identity is conceived as a process of questioning carried on during the child's attempt to discover his or her own origin. Here the problem of sexual difference is assigned outside of biology and it relates to the ways in which the child learns to understand and represent himself or herself.

It is in this sociologically insinuated context that Freud's definition of the three paths open to women must be seen. A woman has the alternatives of repressing all sexuality, of functioning with a masculinity complex, or of taking the "very circuitous path" to "normal feminine attitude."¹² The third option implies that the process of becoming a woman is undertaken through a series of violences, destructions, or repressions that occur as the

girl changes the sex of her object choice and as her actions change from activity to passivity. But the very need for the repressive apparatus reveals active female sexuality and calls into question maternity as the ultimate expression of adult female sexuality.

The reader might be wondering what ever happened to feminist film theory. In 1981, Laura Mulvey published an article entitled, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946)."¹³ Mulvey begins this article by asking, "What about the women in the audience?" and "What happens when there is a female character occupying the center of the narrative arena?" Those queries inaugurate her participation in the search for the theoretical location of female pleasure.

From the start, the problems encountered are different from those at hand when the spectator being theorized is a male. The fact that the psychoanalytic description of feminine sexual identity includes the possibility of "masculinization" when applied to film spectatorship suggests that the female spectator would identify with both male and female protagonists.¹⁴ A change in the gender of the spectator shifts the focus from castration and the oedipal scenario to the areas outlined above relating to problematized femininity. It also shifts critical attention to a different group of films: melodramas with a woman at the story's center are studied instead of films with a male hero, thus providing evidence that the selection of films influences film theory.

In "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure'" Mulvey concentrates on films in which "a woman central protagonist is shown to be unable to achieve a stable sexual identity, torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity."¹⁵ The heroine's dilemma echoes the predicament of the female spectator who must accept "masculinization" to identify with a male hero. All women in question, "real" or fictional, are constructed in relation to instability and oscillation.

This time around, Mulvey describes female psychological life as it exists *over time*, rather than dwelling on any formative moment or even stage of identity construction. Residual ambiguities in sexual identity continue to erupt throughout a woman's life. They are never "taken care of" for good. Mulvey quotes Freud in "Femininity":

I will only emphasize here that the development of femininity remains exposed to disturbances by the residual phenomenon of the early masculine period. Regressions to the pre-Oedipus phase very frequently occur; in the course of some women's lives there is a *repeated alternation* between periods in which femininity or masculinity gain the upper hand.¹⁶

Duel in the Sun, Mulvey's inspiration, takes as its heroine a girl named Pearl. The plot describes her attempt to find and live a mature femininity

that is not repressive. Two brothers offer her alternative paths of development. One brother is socially sanctioned, upright, cultured; the other wild, sexual, macho. They personify the qualities with which Pearl's femininity could find symbiosis. In the end, Pearl is unable to settle on "a femininity" in which she and the male world can meet.¹⁷ In the desert heat, Pearl and Lewt (the wild, sexual brother) hunt each other down, shoot each other, and die in a sweaty embrace. Through this film, one can see that femininity need not signify sexuality in a simple sense, nor need femininity be merely an object of patriarchal domination. The very exploration in and of itself of the conflicted feminine position can provide the premise of a Hollywood narrative.

Psyche and Culture

The first area analyzed above included work characterizing the textual representation of the position of woman as absent. The second area saw femininity as present but "problematized" by definition. Both approaches articulate the *relationship* between psychoanalytic formulations of sexual difference and identity. Both assume that these two psychic processes must be taken together, the first seeing the pairing as resulting in an impossible feminine position while the second sees this pairing as resulting in a fundamentally unstable and contradictory feminine position. Monique Plaza, whose work I accept as laying out the theoretical base for the third area to be identified, steps back to question the results of the sexual difference/identity couple. Her work is not a refusal of "sexual difference" in the sense in which the term has been central for feminist film theory, where the recognition of sexual difference is the recognition that woman is *other than* not-male. It is, rather, a look at the problems of "difference" where woman is posited as *other and* not-male.

In "Phallic Power" and the Psychology of Woman: A Patriarchal Chain," Plaza critiques the contention that "woman" does not exist.¹⁸ She points out that the argument for the absence of "woman" must be based on an analysis of patriarchal discourses such as philosophy and literature (one could go on here to cite art, architecture, government, and so on) that do not often include contributions by women as preserved artifacts. This latter point is also granted by those adherents to the first category outlined. They do not mean to argue that individual women or women in general do not exist. Their own publications and existence immediately negate that point of view. They too are arguing that it is patriarchal discourse that excludes women. However, there is a basic difference in the two points of view. While the work described in the first section of this article theorizes a patriarchal structure *virtually effective* in its repressive strategies, Plaza envisages a nonmonolithic patriarchy that is *not* exhaus-

tive in its control and descriptions of the material world. To posit alternative women's or radical discourses is not to invent an "elsewhere" outside of ideology, but rather to recognize the limitations of patriarchal ideology. Patriarchy is simply *not* all-inclusive. Discourse, even discourse produced by men, is *phallogentric*, but not *phallogomorphic*.

The theory of sexual difference is used by feminists who want a way to talk about women that does not fall into the male/not-male binarism of the first group. But Plaza is not at all convinced that the attempt has been successful, since sexual difference is still understood to be ordered around "having" or "lacking" the phallus. In theoretical practice, the phallus is a metaphor, a sign imposed by patriarchal symbolic order and not a "real" lack in women. Nonetheless, it must still be viewed as a metaphor that is "propped" on or exists in inextricable relation to the anatomical realm.¹⁹ Plaza argues that this way of thinking poses a division of labor that implies not only *differentiation*, but also *hierarchization*, since to have the phallus is valorized by the social system that formulates the metaphor. For Plaza, posing sexual difference in this light is only the flip side of the denial of difference that the first and second groups note as a characteristic of classical representation.

A significant difficulty arises from the fact that psychoanalysis does not sufficiently differentiate the processes through which identity is constituted (the separation of self and other) from the processes of sexual differentiation. But, since processes of sexual differentiation carry an inherently hierarchical structure that is socially prescribed, it is a mistake to collapse the two. Plaza argues:

If the category of sex has such an important position in patriarchal logic, this is not because sex gives its shape to the social; it is because the social is able to make sexual forms seem obvious and thereby hide oppressive systems.²⁰

Thus, Plaza demonstrates the necessity of understanding the psychic process of sexual differentiation as propped on the biological *and* as further ordered by the sociological.

In the social realm, the concept of a man does not rest only on his sexual identity. It expands to embody other "human" qualities possessed by "mankind" that are collectively understood as good qualities. Therefore, to base the singularity of individuals on their gender identity means something different for the man and the woman since a woman has a lower place in the symbolic hierarchy. Feminist theory, if it is to be feminist, must resist the total fusion of singularity and gender identity. Woman is *not only* woman. For Plaza,

To reveal its existence and lay bare its mechanisms, it is necessary to bring down the idea of "woman," that is, to denounce the fact that the category of sex has invaded gigantic territories for oppressive ends. . . .

At the psychological level, it is the signifier "woman" which must summarize for the woman the whole of her existence. The weight of this signifier in her psychic system is made possible by her subjection to the patriarchal symbolic arrangements. . . . Woman exists too much as a signifier. Woman exists too much as subjected, exploited individual.²¹

The concept of woman must be extended to a general, human category, without the loss of either the sexual or cultural specificity of femaleness.

It would be difficult to go on from here without reference to the work of Mary Ann Doane wherein is proposed an approach to the sexual difference/self-identity quandry different from Plaza's call for sociological correction. In "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," Doane presents the terms of the feminist critique of essentialism and the problems encountered by that position. Antiesentialist feminist theory tiptoes around notions of the female body, thus collapsing its focus onto male psychic development at the expense of an account of female psychic development. Doane argues for the reformulation of the relation between body and psyche as a way out of the essentialist/antiesentialist impasse. The concept of "propping" or "anacisis" used by Jean Laplanche provides a way to explain this relation between body and psyche, as does Lacanian work. Here the phallus is a necessary signifying presence, and gender-differentiated relationships to discourse are based on differing relationships to that representational stake. Since we know that women do "speak," the project Doane identifies is to interrogate the complex body-psyche relation, where body is not an essence but a condition of discursive practice, to define a construction of feminine specificity.²²

This is not so simple. Critical discourse about the cinema in general is easily elided into an extension of that institution. As Christian Metz puts it, "Knowledge of the cinema is obtained via a 'reprise' of the native discourse in two senses of the word: taking it into consideration and re-establishing it."²⁴ In feminist film theory, the danger is twice as common and twice as potent, to the extent that feminist theoretical work that provides a reprise of the repressive textual function in relation to the position of the woman seems intuitively to account wisely for textual operations. But by concentrating on the classical text, isn't the feminist theorist undervaluing both possibilities for experimentation with the film medium and alternatives in critical discourse? This trap is one that Monique Plaza terms "patriarchal *bonclage*," meaning that feminist work can easily loop or buckle over on itself in such a way as to become an arm of the patriarchal critical institution it aims to react against.²⁵

Those who recognize this pitfall have pioneered several routes of resis-

tance. First of all, not all Hollywood classical films need be read as totally recuperative of feminine desire. For example, Mary Ann Doane's analysis of *Caught* and *Rebecca* points to cinematic passages that operate to resist the objectification of the woman as spectacle for the male gaze.²⁶ These films are obsessed with female fantasy, rehearsing the relationship between female subjectivity and desire. Another option is the work currently being done by the British Film Institute on the production and marketing of "stars." For example, even if Joan Crawford as Mildred Pierce (in the film of that title) is remanded to the family at the end of the film, Joan Crawford as "star" lives on through subsidiary images of publicity and press coverage. Finally, women filmmakers are experimenting with the medium to discover its capacity to express our desire. This work must be supported by feminist critical readings of their films.

One certainly hesitates to authorize feminist speech by quoting from Freud, but at the same time it is satisfying to realize that his challenge to learn about femininity by "[inquir[ing] from your own experiences of life, or turn[ing] to the poets, or wait[ing] until science can give you deeper and more coherent information" is being met and even gone beyond.²⁷ The enigma not just of femininity but of the relationship between psychosexuality and culture is an enigma currently subject to critical interrogation by numerous feminist thinkers, the work of some of whom it has been the purpose of this article to explore.

Notes

1. See, for example, Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974) and *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), translated by R. Albury and P. Foss as "That Sex Which Is Not One," in *Language, Sexuality, Subversion*, ed. Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris (Darlington, Australia: Feral Publications, 1978); Sarah Kohman, *L'Enigme de la femme: La femme dans les textes de Freud* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1980), and "The Narcissistic Woman: Freud and Girard," *Diacritics* 10 (Fall 1980): 36-45; Julia Kristeva, "Le Sujet en proces: Le langage poetique," in *L'identite* (Paris: Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1977). English translations of works by French feminists that have appeared since the original publication of this article include Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), and *Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). For a contribution by British feminists, see *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, trans. Jacqueline Rose, ed. and intro. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1983).
2. Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989); Tania

Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist Age"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); Diane Waldman, "Film Theory and the Gendered Spectator: The Female or the Feminist Reader?" *Camera Obscura* 18 (1989): 80-94; Constance Penley, *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Maureen Thurn, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989).

3. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

4. *Ibid.*, 9.

5. *Ibid.*, 11.

6. *Ibid.*, 13-14.

7. Quoted in Ernest Jones, M.D., *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2, 1901-1919 (New York: Basic Books, 1955), 421.

8. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1975); Jacqueline Rose, "Psychoanalysis and Feminism," minicourse for the Centre Universitaire Americain du Cinéma à Paris, December 1981. The publication of *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* has occurred since this article was originally published. It is in their lengthy introductions to the selected essays that Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose elaborate on the ideas referred to here.

9. Sigmund Freud, "The Infantile Genital Organization: An Interpolation into the Theory of Sexuality" (1923), in *The Ego and the Id*, vol. 19 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1963-1974); "Femininity" (1933), in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, vol. 22 of *The Standard Edition*.

10. Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-1895), vol. 2, *The Standard Edition*; Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), vol. 7, *The Standard Edition*.

11. Freud, "Femininity" (1933), vol. 21, *The Standard Edition*, 135.

12. Freud, "Feminine Sexuality" (1931), vol. 21, *The Standard Edition*.

13. Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946)," *Framework* 15-17 (1981): 12-15.

14. Since this article was originally published the possibility that male spectators might identify with a female protagonist has been explored by Richard Dyer (*Gags and Film* [New York: Zoetrope, 1984]), among others.

15. Mulvey, "Afterthoughts," 12.

16. Mulvey, "Afterthoughts," 13.

17. Mulvey, "Afterthoughts," 15.

18. Monique Plaza, "'Phallogomorphic Power' and the Psychology of 'Woman': A Patriarchal Chain," trans. Miriam David and Jill Hodges, in *Harman Sexual Relations: Towards a Redefinition of Sexual Politics*, ed. Mike Brake (New York: Pantheon, 1982). Originally, "Pouvoir 'Phallogomorphe' et la psychologie de 'la Femme,'" *Questions Feministes* 1 (November 1977).

19. Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehman

(1970; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). The discussion of "propping" is central to this book.

20. Plaza, "Phallogomorphic Power," 328.
21. Plaza, "Phallogomorphic Power," 347-48.
22. Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," *October* 17 (Summer 1981): 23-36. Doane cites Michele Montrelay, "Inquiry into Femininity," *mf* 1 (1978): 83-101. "Woman's Stake" has recently been collected as chap. 1 in Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).
23. Doane cites the work of Julia Kristeva in this context.
24. Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," *Screen* 16 (Summer 1975): 14-76. Translated from the original French version, which appeared in *Communications* 23 (1975): 3-55.
25. Miriam David and Jill Hodges, the translators of Plaza's "Phallogomorphic Power," have translated *bouclage* as "chain."
26. Mary Ann Doane, "Caught and Rebecca: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence," *Erotic* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1981), and 6, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 75-89. This article has been revised as "Female Spectatorship and Machines of Projection: Caught and Rebecca," chap. 6 in Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
27. Freud, "Feminine Sexuality," 135.

Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Female-Oriented Melodramas of the 1950s

Jackie Byars

In the aftermath of World War II, upwardly and physically mobile families were uprooted and American commitment to the extended family (always more of a utopian fantasy than an actuality) waned.¹ Even as Americans seemed to embrace a model of the nuclear family centered on a heterosexual couple with the male as the sole breadwinner, the nuclear family seemed threatened as increasing numbers of women left their homes to enter the work force. Sociohistorical and economic conditions began to allow the questioning of the family, the foundation of American society: was it a "natural" or a social collective? Hollywood, too, moved in this direction of inquiry as filmmakers working in a variety of genres—from Westerns to thrillers—turned to the family.² The genre that most effectively and directly addressed this institution and the tensions of heterosexual desire was the melodrama. The various film melodramas of the 1950s—maternal melodramas, patriarchal melodramas, lover-centered melodramas—laid bare the family's internal contradictions more explicitly than any other film genre, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith explains:

Melodrama can . . . be seen as a contradictory nexus, in which certain determinations (social, physical, artistic) are brought together but in which the problem of the articulation of these determinations is not successfully resolved. The importance of melodrama . . . lies precisely in its ideological failure. Because it cannot accommodate its problem, either in