

Historical Predictions, Contemporary Predilections: Reading Feminist Theory Close Up

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This is an essay about experience—the experience of viewing films and the experience of reading theory. It's also an essay about passion—the passion of this experience that is at once emotional and intellectual. In preparation for this work, I have been asking myself, where is the passion in our theories and our histories of film today? It is obviously there in our attendance to subjects in history who were once lost, marginalized and misunderstood, and it is often in the details of interpretation. But how can it become infused into our very writing of history and theory? This passion, for me, begins in the act of seeing and the act of reading. In thinking about these questions, I also want to ask how one can write about the film or theory one loves. How does love not become uncritical appreciation? How does it also encompass a conscious, critical eye? Finally, how does a passionate experience of theory (or theory based on experience) enter into our writings (and re-writings) of history?

The theoretical works produced largely in the silent era in the pages of *Close-Up*, particularly that by Dorothy Richardson and H.D., may help us think through these questions. For both of these writers and their collaborators in the journal, the experience of viewing always encompasses an act of critical thinking. I want to look at the legacy they offer us in order to consider how we might recall these theoretical texts, so lodged in their own moment of experience and history, into the currency of theoretical speculation and production.

Though an edited collection of articles from the journal was recently published, in many ways *Close-Up* and the contributions of its writers have

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remained lost in the late silent and early sound period. Of course this refrain of loss and the call for recovery is a common one in the field of women and silent film, one we might allow only as a starting point. But the case of the *Close-Up* writers is peculiarly instructive, in part because it allows us to consider where their interests have appeared in spite of their relative absence in film theory and history, and in part because it offers an opportunity for us to imagine how theory, like history, can have a new life in the present. Indeed, many of the same interests that guided the writers in *Close-Up* have been those that have helped to define film theory, especially since the 1960s.

Contributors such as H.D. and others examined film through a psychoanalytic framework, while columnist Dorothy Richardson focused her attention on the experiential practices of moviegoing. Bryher's political stance showcased a concern with what might later be deemed ideological analysis, while the journal as a whole was invested in the representation of race and productions by filmmakers such as Oscar Micheaux. The journal was also inherently transnational and interdisciplinary in the scope of its interests and in the make-up of its contributors. It was largely produced by Modernist poets and novelists, some of whom were U.S. expatriates or internationalists, and some of whom were committed to producing as well as investigating visual work. Like the original writers and editors of both *Cahiers du Cinema* in France and *Film Culture* in the U.S., *Close-Up* writers also eventually made films, most notably *Borderline* (Kenneth MacPherson, U.K., 1930), a production on which they collaborated with Paul and Eslanda Robeson.

While I am interested in returning to some of these questions—especially the concern with experience—that *Close-Up* and some contemporary theorists consider, first I would like to imagine what possibilities the work of H.D. and Richardson, in particular, offer us for thinking about the history and the present of theory. As I've noted, silent film studies is often concerned with rediscovery and revival, but this revival is focused largely on film texts and the rediscovery (the historicization) of an analysis of the scene of reception. On the other hand, while some critics persist into the present (Walter Benjamin is perhaps the best example from this period), we often don't want to revive the writings of an earlier period. If we do, we tend to historicize them rather than bring them into a present context, to consciously make them part of our contemporary practice. These writings, however, like the films scenes of reception, also make up the history of the period, the reception of the medium, and the foundational ways critics and scholars have thought about films. In other words, however explicitly or implicitly we might try, we cannot simply abandon ideas of the past. If we have learned to refuse a narrative of progress in relation to film production, can't we also refuse a narrative of progress in the production of ideas? (This does not mean dispensing with critique or falling prey to nostalgia

but building that critique *and* perhaps even a nostalgia—at least as a desire for something that doesn't yet exist—into our reading of theory produced in the silent era.)

Have I gone astray from my promise to write about passion and experience in this reflection on history? Is this inevitable? Is the distance that history—or *time*—provides ever productive of “passionate detachment,” as Laura Mulvey notoriously demanded? Rather, I'd argue, the potential for passion exists in the revival and writing of history as well as in the understanding of “historical” theory in the present. Moreover, our experience—as historians, scholars, and viewers—is often inscribed through the present tense of writing, itself sprung from the “present” tense of viewing. This presence, and the experience it marks, is an essential element of the works of both Richardson and H.D.—in their original forms and in the ways we might see them as models today.

H.D.'s writings in *Close-Up* are particularly modeled after the visual medium; she enacts the cinematic form in her written work. Richardson's regular column was usually descriptive of the very scene of reception; her work takes into account the experiential practices of viewing and the physical space of the theater. Though their approaches are in many ways quite different—H.D. argues for the “leavening” role of film and the film critic, while Richardson pays attention and tribute to the popular audience—each woman emphasizes the practice of film viewing as having intellectual and material value and implications. H.D., in particular, displays how film viewing produces affective and intellectual responses (which are ultimately never divorced from one another); she also gestures to how the experience of viewing transcends the theater space, infecting us visually, emotionally, and intellectually before and after the moment of viewing. Richardson argues that film viewing is a process of “collaboration” between the film and the viewer; it is an act that is “as intimate as thought.” She simultaneously describes the physicality and materiality of the viewing experience. Thus film viewing is a practice inscribed by material and cultural conditions as well as a practice that involves intellectual work. Indeed, she ultimately merges the intellectual and the material, often through the form of the female viewer. Most importantly, then, both women write from the experience of their own viewing practices—they conjoin, as so many feminist theorists will do years later, the positions of spectator and theorist. They also examine, from different perspectives, the intimate relation between films and the world. Films, for them, are part of the world.

For Dorothy Richardson, the world exists in the space of the theater itself. She sees the world in the figures of the theater and she sees how a “collaboration” takes place between the film and its viewers almost in spite of each participant. Actually, what Richardson demands is that we see what is already before us. In “Continuous Performance VIII,” she describes the woman who talks throughout a (silent) film, who drives other viewers mad,

but who demands that we look around her and understand how “collaboration” takes place between a film and its viewers. As Richardson writes (and I cite her at length):

Let us attend to her, for she can lead her victim through anger to cynicism and on at last to a discovery that makes it passing strange that no male voice has been raised save in condemnation, that no man, film-lover and therefore for years past helplessly at her mercy, has risen up and cried Eureka. For she is right. For all her bad manners that will doubtless be pruned when the film becomes high art and its temple a temple of stillness save for the music that at present inspires her to do her worst, she is innocently, directly, albeit unconsciously, upon the path that men have reached through long centuries of effort and of thought. She does not need, this type of woman clearly does not need, the illusions of art to come to the assistance of her own sense of existing. Instinctively she maintains a balance, the thing perceived and herself perceiving. . . . Down through the centuries men and some women have pathetically contemplated art as a wonder outside themselves. It is only in recent years that man has known beauty to emanate from himself, to be his gift to what he sees. And the dreadful woman asserting herself in the presence of no matter what grandeurs unconsciously testifies that life goes on, art or no art and that the onlooker is part of the spectacle.¹

This discussion comes after her piece on “The Front Rows,” in which she “meditates” on the young boys in the audience who “see and assist” the film, displaying the ways in which film becomes as “intimate as thought.” In each of these pieces, as throughout her work at large, Richardson emphasizes acts of collaboration or cooperation between the film and its viewers in the most mundane activities, like talking back to the screen. Thus the space around her also becomes part of the image and the activity she describes: the film exists in the world, and the theater stands for that world. Richardson marks this collaboration and its urgency through her use of the present tense. She describes watching the woman as we see a film: in the act of its unfolding.

Richardson’s writing evokes Tom Gunning’s ruminations on the “temporality of the cinema of attractions,” in which he distinguishes the different temporalities of the early cinema of attractions and narrative cinema. Drawing on the work of narrative theorists such as Paul Ricoeur, Gunning defines time in narrative as “the gathering of successive moments into a pattern, a trajectory, a sense.”² In this way, Gunning sees narrative as implicitly inscribed by a past tense; like actualities, narratives record rather than display. The display of the cinema of attractions, on the other hand, “is limited to the pure present tense of its appearance, but the announcing gesture creates a temporal frame of expectation and even suspense.”³ Here is the “possibility of an experience of a time of pure instance.”⁴ Gunning is describing work from a different historical context than that which

Richardson and H.D. experience, and the specificity of the types of films he investigates is obviously central to his argument. Still, given the historical and theoretical moves that Gunning himself makes (from Metz to Eisenstein to early cinema and back), I think his conception of the “cinema of attractions” might be usefully applied to an understanding of the theoretical work of the *Close-Up* writers.

The very tense of Richardson’s writing, and the urgency it inscribes and implores, is constitutive of her theory of film. It was also enabled by the mode of Richardson’s production: her writings, like those films popular decades before them, were produced in a kind of serial form. “Continuous Performance” was a regular contribution in *Close-Up* (hence the name), so the ideas, in effect, appeared as installments of Richardson’s thought: unfolding, in a sense, in a continuum, even while her thinking varied over time. But each column is also a “display” of her ideas, perhaps even a “possibility of an experience of a time of pure instance.” In the same way that the onlooker is part of the spectacle for Richardson, we might also see her theories (and those of others, of course) as part of the field of film, something to see and to read, something to take its own form, but also to be enabled by the form about which it speaks.

How then do we build on this theory? How do we see these writings? How do they work their way into the spectacle of theory and of history? In part, I think we can take Richardson’s prescriptions for film viewing and reapply them to the production and reading of film theory. That is, film for her is a form of intercommunication, and it is a social art. As a social art, she writes, it is “a show, something for collective seeing, and even in the day that finds us all owning projectors and rolls of film from the local circulating filmery it still will be so, a small ceremonial prepared for a group, all of whom must adjust their sensibilities at a given moment and at the film’s pace.”⁵ Thus Richardson repeatedly observes how each member might be lost in thought or actively pursuing a collaboration with the film—this bespeaks Christian Metz’s notions years later—but she emphasizes how this seemingly solitary experience is always also a collective one. It is not that we all see the same thing or say the same thing, but that we experience film in a collective space.

Here again the world and the film come together. Film is never just film. It exists in the world, in the reality of the theater, in the reality of the minds of the audience, and therefore it cannot be divorced from reality (even if the images themselves are). By connecting these ways of thinking about film to ways of thinking about film history and theory, we can imagine how to link our work to the historical work that has preceded it and to that other work of viewing—emotional as well as intellectual—that always also precedes our writing. Let us, then, imagine how the practice of viewing is an intimate part of the practice of writing and of theorizing. In this way, writing, like viewing,

is an inherently collective process—across historical periods, theoretical models, and viewing experiences. Today theoretical work—particularly in the demand ever to produce something “new” in the marketplace of ideas—rarely has the opportunity to appear in this sort of serial form, particularly in academic journals. But bringing “past” theory into the present is a little like bringing the present tense of viewing into writing. This is history and theory revisited, commingling with what we know now, for what we know now is built on these ways of thinking, in a dialectical—or even a serial—relation with those feminist theorists who have come before us.

For H.D., the act of viewing seems more solitary than for Richardson, largely because she describes the very intimate experience of her own viewing. Still, like Metz years later, she becomes a model or agent or translator of a broader experience shared by others. In her work, the film becomes a part of her as a viewer: it imposes itself into her mind and body; it becomes part of her world during the experience of the viewing, before and after the viewing, and then in her acts of writing. It exists in the reality of her emotional life, which is itself always connected to her intellectual life. All of these things—the collective experience of the audience, the relation between passion and intellect—come through in her discussion of “restraint” prompted by a screening of the film *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Carmine Gallone and Amleto Palermi, Italy, 1926). In the midst of her complaints about the film and her ruminations on how classics, beauty, and even restraint might be defined in the moving image, she writes:

Tear away hideousness from the human form, from the human mind and from the human spirit. A perfect medium has at least been granted us. Let us be worthy of it. You and I have got to work. We have got to begin to care and to care and to care.⁶

Caring, working and the plural first-person are all part of the same process and the same demands she makes here. Part of her own work exists in her acts of translation of images into writing and in the “transmutation” of the cinematic form into the world outside the theater. For instance, in her ostensible discussion of the film *Expiation* (Sinclair Hill, U.K., 1922) (almost all of her “theory” derives from a particular film or at least a particular experience of seeing a particular film), she describes the events that preceded the viewing. On her way to the theater she has to walk down a road because her cab won’t take her there. She is already running late, so this necessitates a quick pace:

. . . I plunged down this little street somewhat reeling, making jig-jag to find just how those shadows cut just that block (and that block) into perfect design of cobbled square and square little doorway till I found myself at the entrance of a slice of a theatre, the Palace of Lausanne. I couldn’t go in, must climb the

little street again like a fanatic bobsleigh runner in order again to run down. I so poignantly wanted to re-visualize those squares of doors and shutters and another and another bit of detail that of necessity was lost at first that I did illogically (I was already late) climb back . . . I ran up and down the scale, so to speak of visual emotion, of memory, of visual sensation making that street and every one of its little graduations a sort of intellectual accordion from which to draw tunes, the sort of things one tries to put down sometimes (but never quite succeeds in doing) after a particularly poignant dream. . . .⁷

While Richardson sees the social world represented in the theater, H.D. sees how film takes over the world outside. In this essay, film is in the world; the cinematic is a way of seeing. Understanding her physical movement as a kind of “visual emotion,” H.D. displays affect in the form of her writing: a breathless flow of words that echo the run up and down the street, as well as the cinematic sights she sees.

Decades later Christian Metz writes that “wishing to get rid of the affective gets one nowhere” in the analysis of the cinema.⁸ The ambivalence that he prescribes is definitive of a potential intellectual awareness of affect; this delimits neither thought nor emotion, but allows them to coexist. Thus for Metz, “To be a theoretician of the cinema, one should ideally no longer love the cinema and still love it: have loved it a lot and only have detached oneself from it by taking it up again from the other end. . . . Have broken with it, as certain relationships are broken, not in order to move on to something else, but in order to return to it at the next bend in the spiral.”⁹ In her essay on Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (France, 1928), H.D. presents the kind of ambivalence Metz demands here. She therefore describes the ways by which the film intrudes on the minds of the viewers, rhetorically invoking the experience of thought through film as she does in her work on *Expiation*. Here H.D. writes:

The Jeanne d’Arc of the incomparable Dreyer it seems to me, was kicked towards the angels. . . . Such psychic manifestation I need hardly say, need be in no way indicated by any outside innovation of cross lights or of superimposed shadows. It is something in something, something behind something. It is something one feels, that you feel, that the baker’s boy, that the tennis champion, that the army colonel, that the crocodile of English and Dutch and mixed German-Swiss (come here to learn the French) feels. We are numb and beaten, We won’t go a second time. . . . For all our preparation, we are unprepared. This Jeanne d’Arc is sprung on us and why should it be?¹⁰

These were some of H.D.’s last contributions to the journal, and surely they both display and presage how her interest in psychoanalysis (she is well-known as an analysand of Freud’s) takes over, for a time, her intellec-

tual life. But already the two are conjoined in her mode of visual writing, in her analogies to dreams, and in her references to the “psychic manifestation” of Dreyer’s film.

In *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Annette Kuhn asks: “Does the naïve, the untutored, the everyday response have anything to offer the professional, the academic, the intellectual one?”¹¹ Kuhn thus considers how emotion and experience can be “taken on board—if with a degree of caution—by cultural theory,” weaving memories of film viewing into her analysis of the text and the viewing experience.¹² Through H.D. and Dorothy Richardson and through my own viewings, I, too, want to think about how experience itself is not obsolete for theory. I recognize that in part what I’m saying is not new—we see evidence of experience across various theoretical models—but that is part of my point. Like Kuhn, I want experience to enter feminist consciousness in other ways, in part through the integration of the historical and theoretical work of writers in *Close-Up*—whose writings have, like many films, haunted me and my experience, becoming interlopers in my own production of intellectual work. The afterlife of those writings (and my readings) thus exists in other viewing experiences and in my writings about them.

This afterlife also exists in subsequent readings of work that has come since. I have been looking for the “I” of experience—the expert critic who is first of all a viewer—who emerged in *Close-Up* (and, not long after in the pages of the early *Cahiers du Cinema* and *Film Culture*). This “I” reemerges in psychoanalytic writings by Christian Metz and Roland Barthes, in various feminist work of the 1970s, in autobiographical and ethnographic work of the last fifteen years, and in such spaces for reflection as *Camera Obscura*’s “Spectatrix” issue. In fact, in her contribution to that issue Pat Mellencamp writes: “Accompanying a focus on audiences and reception, feminism has revived its interest in biography, the first person pronoun and personal experience—comparable to the autobiography requested for this project.”¹³ And in her contribution, Janet Walker writes, “For me, then, the notion of the female spectator is worthwhile as long as that female spectator is conceptualized as a female subject whose psychic construction leans on both body and psyche, products in turn of the wider social field, and as long as the female spectator is also conceptualized as a social spectator of her contemporaneous historical field.”¹⁴

To lean on body and psyche, to be a product of a wider social field, to act as a social spectator of her historical field—these were all activities bound in the work of feminist writers in *Close-Up*. To reintegrate them now, to reinvent theory through our collaboration with them and our conscious recognition of their legacy and our passionate attachment to what we do—that is what I suppose I’m asking for here. Our experience of viewing itself

is often ineffable but it is also experience on which history and theory are inescapably grounded.

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Notes

- 1 Dorothy Richardson, "Continuous Performance VIII," vol. II, no. 3 (March 1928) in *Close-Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus, eds. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1998), 176.
- 2 Tom Gunning, "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 76.
- 3 Gunning, 77.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 5 Richardson, "Almost Persuaded," vol. IV, no. 6 (June 1929) in *Close-Up*, 191.
- 6 H.D., "The Cinema and the Classics II: Restraint," vol. I, no. 2 (August 1927), in *Close-Up*, 112.
- 7 H.D., "Expiation," vol. II, no. 5 (May 1928) in *Close-Up*, 125.
- 8 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 14.
- 9 Metz, 15. Patricia White explores this same statement in relation to lesbian cinephilia in *unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). As she writes, "I think it makes a kind of intuitive sense to link "gynophilia"—love of women—with cinephilia—love of movies, to recognize that cinema's stock-in-trade, the eroticized image of Woman, is also addressed to us." White, 15.
- 10 H.D., "Joan of Arc," vol. III, no. 1 (July 1928) in *Close-Up*, 133.
- 11 Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London and N.Y.: Verso, 1995), 27.
- 12 Kuhn, 28.
- 13 Patricia Mellencamp, entry in "The Spectatrix," *Camera Obscura* (special issue), ed. Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane, *Camera Obscura* 20, no. 1 (May-September 1989), 235.
- 14 Janet Walker, entry in "The Spectatrix," 318.