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Formal Disruption in Avant-Garde Cinema of the Second Half of the 20th Century – A Feminist Act?

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of examination for the BA (Hons) in Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institute.

Signed,

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ABSTRACT

This thesis views the process of 'formal disruption' in avant-garde cinema as a radical feminist act. It explores how feminist filmmaker Abigail Child 'disrupts' conventional form to foreground its presence, and argues that her work contributes to feminist theory on the deconstruction of dominance in culture. Focusing on the latter half of the 20th century, this thesis contextualises the film and theory explored within a period of revolutionary cultural change. Through discussions on film form, feminist discourse, semiotics and gender theory, it investigates the common threads and theoretical overlaps that, when drawn together, present a powerful critique of dominant cinema and its wider cultural impact.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis brings together discussions of avant-garde cinema, film form, feminist discourse and semiotic theory. The research is rooted in film and theory of the latter half of the 20th Century, from the 1950's to the late 1990's, as these decades saw the emergence of a re-energised, 'radical' feminist movement. It is also crucial to note that these discussions are largely sited in the global 'west', with the cultural and cinematic conventions explored primarily relating to the US and Europe.

Throughout the essay, I argue that feminist theorists and avant-garde filmmakers were engaged in an active and symbiotic partnership (albeit a somewhat 'unofficial' one) which propelled the development of both spheres. While this thesis undoubtedly meanders through a broad terrain, moving from film to semiotic to gender theory, it is my hope that by drawing together different areas of study and examining where they overlap and echo one another, I can probe the way in which meaning is 'formally' constructed in a more comprehensive, revelatory manner.

In the first chapter, I lay the groundwork for these discussions by contextualising key terms and concepts: 'form', 'formal disruption', 'radical feminism' and 'avant-garde cinema'. 'Form' is undoubtably at the core of this thesis - the first section engages with the long-standing debate on 'form and content' that has haunted discussions of art since the very outset. I reflect on and ultimately challenge dominant culture's tendency to dichotomise form and content, arguing for an analysis of film which sees the two as intrinsically interdependent (Robertson, 1). Chapter one also provides an introduction to the 'radical' feminism of the 1970's, a movement which sought to dismantle dominant patriarchal structures in society.

In chapter two, I delve deeper into the processes that produce meaning in culture. Looking at Stuart Hall's writing on semiotic theory alongside the work of avant-garde filmmaker Abigail Child, I investigate *how* meaning is constructed through a film's form. Through a process of 'formal disruption', Child foregrounds the way conventional form operates in dominant narrative cinema - an action which I argue destabilises the very dominance and 'seamlessness' of conventional cinema's identity. In this context, I suggest that the avant-garde invites audiences to observe and consider a film's form - allowing them to develop an awareness of form and its role in the production of meaning.

Finally, in chapter three, I explore the politics of form – that is, the cultural origins and impacts of these structures which 'make meaning' in film. If form *determines* meaning, (Bordwell et al. 54) what are the political implications of a 'dominant' film form, and more broadly, of 'naturalised knowledge' for culture and society? The final chapter pulls from the work of gender theorist Judith Butler and film theorists Laura U. Marks and Nicola Rehling in order to examine why academic, filmic and broader cultural conventions function in such violent and delimiting ways. Their writings advocate for a radical, 'formal' shift to ensure that these "violent circumscriptions of reality" are not replicated perpetually (Butler, xxi).

Abigail Child wrote that "film imprints the culture from which it is created and recreates, recasts the world, reflecting an artificial world that takes on a life of its own" (xxiii). The way this thesis brings together film and feminist theory, analogising filmic form with broader societal structures, demands that one 'takes cinema seriously'- if only in the sense of recognising its influence. As an element of culture, both born from and contributing to a cultural reality shared by many, film and its formal conventions have become a key area of concern for me, one I feel demands continued attention. Child's statement highlights at once the danger of a dominant cinematic form that operates unchecked, monopolising how meaning is made in culture, and the critical power of an avant-garde cinema that subverts dominant views of 'reality', questioning the structures themselves and the meanings they produce. My contention, that these avant-garde works convey crucial political and even moral theory on the nature of meaning, reflects my desire to see film as a medium free to exist in every possible form, and audiences of film to be equally free to determine their own personal truths – and live them out.

CHAPTER ONE – A CONTEXTUALISATION OF KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

This first chapter explores the terms and concepts central to this thesis. It seeks to clarify what is meant by each term by placing them in the context of the wider discussions in which they appear. It is worth noting that I consciously work to 'contextualise' rather than 'define' these terms and concepts; throughout the thesis, I resist settling for 'fixed' definitions that fail to capture the nuance and open-endedness of categories like 'avant-garde cinema', 'feminism' or terms such as 'form'. Instead, I attempt to understand their 'meaning' within specific instances, leaving room to examine how meaning shifts over time or in different applications. After all, any text that asserts meaning is mutable but fails to reflect this in its writing becomes unfortunately self-undermining.

At the heart of this thesis lies a discussion of form – its construction, its function, and instances of its 'disruption'. Therefore, clarifying what is meant by this term is undoubtably the first port of call.

1.1 FILM FORM

"The structure has become the content" (Aboagora, 1:22).

This statement by Peter Greenaway, made mere minutes into a 2014 keynote address, alludes to the long-held question on the relationship between form and content within film. It also feels decidedly bold - after all, a film's 'form' or structure is sometimes described as 'everything *but* the content'. It is the elements of film - such as editing, sound, cinematography – and how they are ordered, how they come together. Film theorist Laura Mulvey identifies how 'dominant' mainstream cinema has a "tendency to subordinate the formal side, the cinematic process itself" (186). That is to say, mainstream cinema encourages a view of form as decidedly *separate* from content, and less important. It implies that a film's meaning inherently resides in its content, not its form.

Yet many film theorists warn against the pervasive tendency to draw a harsh boundary between content and form. In *'Film Art'*, authors Bordwell, Thompson and Smith treat "as formal elements many of the things that some people consider content" because, in their view, "subject matter and abstract ideas all enter into the total form of the artwork" (52). Their insight provides a broad and nuanced definition of form, and highlights how splitting

form from content ultimately impairs one's ability to analyse film. It nullifies exploration of the relationship between the two and, worse still, gives the illusion this relationship does not actually exist. In reality, meaning "depends on" these very "relations between story and style" (Bordwell et al. 59).

Therefore, analysing the interrelatedness of form and 'content' is keenly relevant to the discussion of avant-garde cinema. Its "characteristic" concern with form reveals its crucial role in the construction of meaning (Aboagora).

1.2 AVANT-GARDE CINEMA

In *'A History of Experimental Film and Video'*, A.L. Rees recognises the slippery nature of the term 'avant-garde', one that frequently slides between titles of 'experimental', 'non-narrative', 'underground' and 'alternative' (2).

Fig 1.1. Still from 'Meshes of the Afternoon' (1943), Maya Deren

For Rees, the fact the avant-garde has "traded under many other names" is indicative of the "inherent differences and even conflicts" within it, "just as it also implies a search for unity across broad terrain" (2). He does not attempt to define the term "in any rigorous way", leaving room for the internal conflicts that are key to the avant-garde's subversive power. Instead, he advises the term be understood within distinct historical contexts (vii).

Focused on a timeframe from the 1950's to late 1990's, this thesis sites the avant-garde films it explores within the context of their time of production, one of significant social change. The films discussed are 'experimental' in the sense that they take an almost 'scientific' approach, enacting feminist theory of the period through the medium of film (Gunning, xvii).

Characterised by a deep concern with form, these avant-garde films work to dismantle formal conventions, aesthetic norms and traditional narrative structure. It is this work which allies them to feminist discourse - their focus on form is impelled by distinctly political aims, both in filmic and feminist spheres.

For film theorist Laura Mulvey, it is these shared aims which create an almost "objective alliance" between feminism and the radical avant-garde (179).

1.2 RADICAL FEMINIST DISCOURSE

The latter half of the 20th century saw vast shifts in thinking within feminist discourse. For the first time, feminists were recognising the need to radically change – to dismantle – the patriarchal structures which lay deeply entrenched in both personal and political spheres of society (J. Rich, 18). The mantra "the personal *is* political" captured how, for the first time, women were looking at all aspects of life through a politically charged, feminist lens. In *'Blood, Bread and Poetry'*, poet Adrienne Rich writes that "breaking the mental barrier that separated private from public life felt in itself like an enormous surge toward liberation" (15). Alongside this, strides in gender theory were destabilising the very foundations. New ways of understanding what a 'woman' was, how concepts of gender and sexual difference were constructed and reproduced within society, were coming to the fore (Rubin, 167).

Fig 1.2. Still from 'Jeanne Dielman' (1975), Chantal Akerman

Fundamentally, the 'radical' feminist movement of the 1970's was interested in how dominant patriarchal structures *operated* in culture – how they constructed cultural codes and reinforced them. In other words, radical feminists wished to understand this dominance on a *formal* level. When viewed through a feminist lens, avant-garde film's ability to demonstrate form and its role in the production of meaning was of undeniable value. 'Formal disruption' represents its own discourse on the destabilisation of dominant structures.

As Mulvey puts it:

> There is a link with those elements in feminist film theory that demand a return to *tabula rasa* (structure within deconstruction) and question how meaning is made as necessary steps towards revolutionising woman's image in patriarchal representation (192).

Mulvey's statement underscores how any theory of feminism - diverse and decentred a category though it may be - must develop an awareness of *how* form shapes meaning if it is to support a lasting emancipation for devalued people in culture (Ramazanoğlu, 7).

But what is meant by ‘formal disruption’ - how does the avant-garde destabilise the dominance of conventional forms by disrupting them?

1.3 FORMAL DISRUPTION

The phrase ‘formal disruption’ immediately brings certain assumptions to the fore. After all, if form can be ‘disrupted’, a formal convention must be in place. In *‘Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies’*, author Scott MacDonald notes how almost no-one “sees avant-garde films without first having seen mass-market commercial films” (1). He recognises how the ‘fundamental’ stature of mainstream cinema means that “even when filmmakers produce and exhibit alternative cinematic forms, the dominant cinema is implied by the alternatives” (1).

In other words, because of its overwhelming dominance in culture, mainstream Hollywood cinema remains the benchmark against which all other film forms are measured. It’s conventional features - “aesthetically unified space and time” (Mulvey, 197), narrative precedence and a concealment of form - therefore appear as ‘natural’ elements of cinema to general audiences. In this context, the avant-garde's prioritisation of form can feel pretentious, its films accused of being ‘contentless’, having little to offer.

All of this explains the rather combative response often garnered by a first encounter with avant garde film - “You call *this* a movie!?” As MacDonald writes, “we recognise that the obvious anger and frustration are a function of the fact that these films confront us with the necessity of redefining an experience we were sure we understood” (2). In reality, avant-garde films are rarely ‘contentless’ - instead, their content is placed in new and exciting formal contexts.

Thus, the avant-garde invites us to expand our idea of ‘what a film can be’. Formal disruption works to not only critique dominant cinema’s narrow set of “filmic options” (MacDonald, 5), but to destabilise the notion that dominant forms are any more valid or ‘natural’ than alternative forms.

In the following chapter, I will first examine the ‘*how’* of these processes - how does Abigail Child disrupt conventional form in her films, and how does providing formal ‘alternatives’ unsettle the very dominance of conventional structure?

CHAPTER 2 - A DEMONSTRATION OF FORMAL DISRUPTION IN *'MERCY' (1989)* BY ABIGAIL CHILD

Abigail Child's early filmic works were born out of the consciousness of the cultural moment from which she emerged. The radicalism of the 1960's, the feminist movements of the 1970's and the rise of 'popular culture' and consumerism all formed the basis for her deep and enduring interest in signification: how meaning is made (Gunning, xxi). After all, radical feminism's drive to dismantle dominant structures reflected a growing cultural interest in meaning and its 'production'. The 1960's saw the emergence of 'semiotics' and 'structuralism' - areas which both place emphasis on the underlying rules, conventions and relationships between elements of a language (Burgoyne et al. 18). Their growth into dedicated fields of study by the 1970's sparked a deeper analysis of the idea of film as a language system (Burgoyne et al. 30).

Therefore, I want to dedicate some time to discussing the work of cultural theorist and semiotician Stuart Hall, as it provides a deeper understanding of the processes at work in Abigail Child's films. This chapter will focus on *'Mercy' (1989)*, exploring how the film's disruption of conventional structure pushes form to the foreground, allowing audiences to experience its role in the production of meaning.

2.1 SEMIOTIC THEORY, FORM AND MEANING

In *'Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices',* Stuart Hall favours a 'constructionist' approach to semiotics. He argues that ultimately, meaning does not reside in things, rather, it is constructed and produced (26). A green traffic light means 'GO', but the 'sign' itself, the green light, does not inherently have this meaning. It was produced in culture, and is fixed to the sign by a cultural 'code'. Meaning is described as 'relational' - it is the relationship *between* signs and concepts which make meaning; codes then fix this meaning (Hall, 27).

When applied to film, the relevance of these ideas is powerful, especially in a feminist context. If meaning is ultimately arbitrary in nature, then the structures which produce and fix meaning can be viewed through a radical feminist lens. The 'why' and 'how' of these conventions can be questioned, with a view to dismantling 'fixed' meanings.

This is the very work which Child undertakes. *'Mercy' (1989)* is constructionist theory in motion. Child's process, which involves collecting a vast array of footage (some original, some archival) and placing them in new and exciting contexts illustrates the relational nature of meaning. She emphasises how it is the relationship between form and content, between filmic images and the contexts in which they appear, which generates their meaning.

Fig 2.1. *Still from 'Mercy' (1989), Abigail Child*

Fig 2.2. *Still from 'Mercy' (1989), Abigail Child*

Take two images from '*Mercy*' which are cut together - fig. 2.1 and fig. 2.2. While many elements suggest these pieces of footage did not originally come from the same source (such as the colour film versus the black and white), in *'Mercy'*, they are placed side by side. In this new context, the second image becomes a reaction to the first. In other words, due to the structure which Child has carefully constructed, their meaning is changed. In this light, Greenaway's proclamation "the structure *is* the content" becomes significantly more credible (Aboagora).

2.2 FORMAL DISRUPTION IN *'MERCY'*

In *'Mercy'*, a diverse range of visuals and sound are placed side by side, juxtaposed against one other to throw form into relief. Here, I will focus on two elements of film form - editing and sound - and the techniques and processes Child employs to 'disrupt' their conventional applications.

2.2.1 Editing and 'The Cut'

In *'Mercy',* Child uses rapid editing to highlight the presence of 'the cut'. Footage is rarely allowed to run for more than a few seconds before a dissolve (one piece of footage fading into the next) or simple, hard cut presents us with something new. For the viewer, the cut as a feature of the film's form is thus immediately impossible to ignore.

Yet *'Mercy'* foregrounds the function of the cut alongside its presence. Above, I noted how fig. 2.1 and 2.2 are 'cut together'. This seemingly paradoxical phrase is nonetheless widely used in film editing, as it captures the dual properties of this most primary element of film form. The cut can bring footage together, as just observed; it constructs meaning by building careful relationships between images. But a 'cut' also splits footage apart, breaking up the supposedly 'continuous' flow of vision that the cinema provides.

In the preface of *'This is Called Moving'*, Tom Gunning underscores this very point. He writes:

> Child understands vividly that montage is not only the art of juxtaposition ... creating new meanings through the meeting of images and sounds, but also a method of interruption (xviii).

Fig 2.3. *Still from 'Mercy' (1989), Abigail Child*

Child thrives on “interruption”. Her use of rapid cutting, a “nearly physical pummelling of the material” as Gunning puts it, interrupts actions before they can reach completion (xix). For example, fig 2.3 captures the movement of a dancer, a gesture of the body. Yet in editing the footage, Child interrupts this gesture by repeatedly cutting into it.

While this can undoubtably feel frustrating for audiences, Child works to highlight how this frustration is symptomatic of the fact “culture has trained us to enjoy” a cinematic experience characterised by “a process of unquestioning consumption” (MacDonald, 2). The dominance of conventional narrative cinema, with its “cause-effect” progression of story (Bordwell et al. 98), means that audiences *expect* that form be treated a certain way. Formal disruption reveals the very presence of an audience’s formal expectations - in this case, that an action will see completion and contribute to the forward thrust of a film’s narrative. After all, conventional narrative cinema has “honed the devices of film editing in order to create an ongoing, dramatically elliptical, and suspenseful rush of continuous time” (Gunning, xiv).

Interrupting action thus allows Child to do something very different – to take what avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren called “the vertical attack”. During a 1953 symposium on *‘Poetry and the Film’*, Deren spoke about ‘poetic structure’ in film. She said:

> The distinction of poetry is its construction (what I mean by "a poetic structure"), and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a "vertical" investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned, in a sense, not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means (Sitney, 174).

By ‘cutting into’ a gesture, Child (almost surgically) opens it up - widening the gap so that we may slip through, may “sink beneath the surface” as Gunning puts it (xx). In other words, Child is inviting audiences to consider action beyond the simple fact of its occurrence – to examine an action deeply and on their own terms, rather than as an ‘objective’ point to be passively consumed, part of a film’s “horizontal plane of development” (Sitney, 174) towards a pre-determined meaning. Punctuating action thus creates a point of pause which allows for a contemplation of an action’s “force and contradictions, before it has become sealed in a finalized intention” (Gunning, xviii). Child is once again returning to the question of meaning; the “vertical approach” reveals the depth of a single action, and invites audiences to

grapple with its many potential meanings for themselves. Child critiques dominant narrative cinema's 'fixed', 'objective' view of meaning by providing a poetic, formal alternative in which 'reality' itself is revealed to be subjective.

2.2.2 Sound

'Mercy' employs sound in a similarly 'disruptive' fashion. The film's unconventional, often symbolic soundscape unsettles the footage it accompanies - and vice versa. An arm opening at the elbow creaks like a door on a hinge; footage is paired with documentary-style narration, or given dramatic dialogue in various languages. Here, sound *recontextualises* images.

Fig 2.4. *Still from 'Mercy' (1989), Abigail Child*

Dominant cinema's claim to 'seamlessness' is destabilised in the face of this unconventional use of sound. By throwing signs of formal construction into relief (in the case of fig 2.4, through the use of an 'unnaturalistic' sound effect), *'Mercy'* provides insight on the 'invisibility' of dominant form and its workings.

In the previous section, it was explored how the 'cutting together' of different footage in *'Mercy'* confronts audiences with the fact dominant narrative film is also formally constructed to produce meaning, despite its attempts to screen this process from spectators. An unconventional soundscape functions in the same way, revealing the cracks in dominant cinema's mask of 'naturalism'. After all, sound is frequently created, collected, and added to conventional narrative film at the post-production stage – the difference being that it attempts to "efface" its signs of production (Burgoyne et al. 192), working invisibly so as to contribute to the film's sense of 'realism' - yet nonetheless reinforcing the filmmakers intended meaning for a piece of footage.

2.2.3 The Role of Formal Disruption

We have established that formal disruption in *'Mercy'* pushes form to the foreground; that exposure to avant-garde films allows audiences to develop an awareness and *sensibility* to the workings of form, encouraging them to recognise its role in the production of meaning.

But why is this important? Why is Child so concerned with form and its function? In *'This is Called Moving'*, Child writes:

> An interest in form is often taken as elitist or decadent … why is this so? Because we cannot back away from ourselves far enough to see the form of our lives? Because we are not allowed to see our lives in the form of the world? Then, I want to ask: how does marginalizing an interest in basic structures abet the status quo? (5)

So far throughout this thesis, I have discussed the synergetic relationship between theorists and practitioners and talked about Child's work as 'enacting' feminist and film theory. In *'The Skin of the Film'*, Laura U. Marks makes a crucial distinction on the nature of this partnership. She writes that the films created by practitioners "are themselves works of theory … they are not waiting to have theory ''done to'' them; they are not illustrations of theory but theoretical essays in their own right" (xv). Crucially, the techniques that Child uses in her work to uproot formal dominance in cinema are widely applicable – they can be traced atop many other dominant structures in culture.

Marks' insight affirms the active and vital role of the avant-garde in discourse – it is unsurprising that developing theory in an academically unconventional form would be highly effective in *conveying* theory on the very need for formal alternatives in culture. As feminist poet Adrienne Rich wrote, by creating "out of a woman's body and experience" artists were "pushing at the limits of experience reflected" in culture (535).

Laura U. Marks notes this tendency of dominant academic tradition to devalue "embodied experience", writing that "sensuous knowledge" (145) was long "considered ''excessive'' and not amenable to analysis" (xvii). In light of Marks' observations, Child's use of formal disruption which allows audiences to *experience* form at work, to *feel* how it shapes meaning, is particularly, subversively powerful. Moreover, the fact Child expresses a desire to reimagine academic conventions in theoretical writing – "for the last decade I have been exploring ways to write theory - to find a space that would enact rather than be about the way thought moves" (54) - reflects a common feminist belief in the value of knowledge *experienced* rather than taught.

Adrienne Rich wrote that "the moment when a feeling enters the body is political" (535). Chapter three is dedicated to examining the politics of form, the ways in which dominant forms are constructed to "abet the status quo" (Child, 5).

Fig 2.5. *Still from 'Mercy' (1989), Abigail Child*

CHAPTER 3 – THE POLITICS OF FORM

In the previous chapter, a semiotic approach allowed us to examine the processes by which meaning is *constructed* in film. Since 'formal disruption' provides a stark contrast to dominant cinematic conventions, its application foregrounds form and reveals its crucial role in determining meaning. While dominant narrative cinema often tries to hide this process from spectators, films such as Child's *'Mercy'* undermines this concealment, providing audiences with fresh clarity.

If understanding *how* films operate is an essential first step, interrogating *why* they operate this way is the crucial follow-up. Child's work questions the *politics* of these processes, alongside an understanding of how they function. She explores the cultural origins and implications of dominant form, dissecting how it is "inscribed by relations of power" (Hall, *Spectacle*, 225). That is why, in this final chapter, I wish focus on the politics of form. Why is disrupting conventional form significant for both film and feminist theory, and why is providing audiences with broader filmic options important?

In order to effectively tackle these questions - to examine the cultural dominance of conventional narrative cinema through a radically feminist lens - I will first dedicate some time to the discussion of 'difference' and 'the Other'. I will then move onto gender theory. This area of study is not only intrinsically tied to radical feminism, but the ideas it raises also effectively apply to a discussion of form and politics. I use these discussions to bolster my argument for the political role of the avant-garde, asserting that it expands freedoms and legitimacy to those 'othered' by dominant culture.

3.1 DIFFERENCE AND 'THE OTHER'

In chapter one, the discussion of 'dominant' versus 'alternative' cinema hinted at a key idea relating to identity – the idea of 'difference'. It was noted how avant-garde film's identity is always defined *in relation* to dominant cinema. Meaning is relational - both in a linguistic and broader cultural sense, meaning relies on difference. We know what something *is* by contrasting it with what it is *not*. Classical narrative cinema and avant-garde cinema are often presented as "binary oppositions", existing at opposite poles, and as with almost all binary oppositions, there is a dominant pole (Hall, *Spectacle* 235). In other words, there is "always a

relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition" (Hall, *Spectacle* 235) - and where there is power, there is politics.

Hall captures this succinctly when he argues: "we should really write, white/*black*, men/*women*, masculine/*feminine*, upper class/*lower class*, British/*alien* to capture this power dimension in discourse" (*Spectacle* 235). There is the dominant and there is 'the Other' - the "subordinate term" (Elsaesser, 37) which is defined by the dominant.

So how does engagement with the concept of 'difference' contribute to feminist theory? It is important to note that a broad and nuanced understanding of 'difference' was considered crucial for radical feminist theorists and artists. The notion of 'essential difference' long confined women to traditionally 'feminine' roles (J. Rich, 18). Much like how a view of content carrying 'inherent' meaning supports the dominance and apparent 'seamlessness' of conventional cinematic form, patriarchal ideas of women's 'inherent' submissiveness ensures a broad cultural acquiescence to their subjugation.

By providing theory on the 'dominant/*avant-garde*' (to borrow from Hall's model), Child consciously contributes to discourse on 'patriarchal form/*feminist form'*. Child's efforts to demonstrate how dominant cinematic form is no more 'inherent' than avant-garde form is fuelled by a distinctly political goal. In revealing the 'constructedness' of dominant narrative film, Child digs up the foundations which support its dominance, making room for a definition of the avant-garde beyond a mere "sub-ordinate term within a binary pair" (Elsaesser, 37). In other words, Child rejects the definition of 'the other' by uprooting the very terms on which the definition is based. As Child eloquently puts it: "Accepting the authority of their definition is playing their game" (12).

Uprooting the foundations of dominance in culture is no small task, however - particularly in light of the deeply 'naturalised' nature of these structures. During the 1960's and 70's, feminist theorists across disciplines were unpicking the elements of culture entangled with the subjugation of women, trying to discern a path forward. Debate swirled around which approaches could best achieve the goals of the movement, and which served only to reinscribe modes of oppression. The path ahead proved twisted and riddled with pitfalls. Mulvey identifies "negation" as a key aspect of the avant-garde (192). At a glance, Child's rejection of patriarchal definitions reflects this idea of negation, of 'denial'. The rejection of male-dominated modes of expression seems central to a feminist struggle - yet simple inversion ultimately reasserts patriarchal structures. That is to say, an 'alternative' cinema

which ‘reimagines’ dominant cinematic form cannot rest on an acceptance of dominant cinema’s ‘seamless’ identity. It must first dismantle the validity of this identity, in order to build a feminist form on “uncontaminated ground” (Mulvey, 186).

Fig 3.1. *Still from ‘Mayhem’ (1987), Abigail Child*

So the filmic form that Child crafts, the feminist theory which she puts forward, is effective *because* of her critical understanding of this point. Her awareness of the need to radically deconstruct dominance in order to build a lasting emancipation for those ‘othered’ by society reflects an ‘experiential’ knowledge of the wide and varied nature of meaning, one that cannot be represented by ‘fixed’ definitions or binary systems. I will now examine gender theory, as the ideas that it raises provide a deeper context for the way ‘difference’ can be used to subvert dominance in the avant-garde.

3.2 GENDER THEORY

Deeply rooted in the feminist movements of the preceding decades, gender theory was emerging as a critical field of study by the 1970's. While primarily responding to the period's prominent feminist writings, gender theory also answered the political call for a theoretical base on which to build a radicalised queer rights agenda (J. Rich, 61-84).

Here, I will largely be referencing Judith Butler's 1990 '*Gender Trouble'*, but this work followed several key formative texts on gender theory, such as Gayle Rubin's widely influential *'Notes on the Political Economy of Sex',* published in 1975 (Big Think). *'Notes'* presented the idea of gender as a social product; exploring "the mechanisms by which children are engraved with the conventions of sex and gender" (Rubin, 166-183).

These writings were truly groundbreaking, excavating ideas of gender at new depths, and introducing theories of gender which would become indispensable to feminist discourse. A view which saw gender not as an immutable, natural fact, but something produced and reproduced in culture, made only to *seem* inherent through social conditioning, destabilised the very foundations of gender essentialism (which attributed 'essential', intrinsic qualities to men and women).

The implications for feminist theory were enormous - if the processes by which gender was 'made' were uncovered, work to dismantle these systems could conceivably begin.

In the preface of the 1999 republication of *'Gender Trouble',* Butler reflects on the seminal text, addressing the questions it still raises. Notably, they emphasise that the true purpose of the work is "to show that the naturalised knowledge of gender operates as a pre-emptive and violent circumscription of reality" (xxiii). This statement contains many of the crucial ideas which tie Butler's theory of gender to a discussion of the radical avant-garde. The concept of "naturalised knowledge" is certainly central to both.

3.2.1 Naturalised knowledge

Butler employs the example of drag in their effort to destabilise a 'naturalised' view of gender. Drag functions, in essence, as a formal disruption, as it 'disrupts' the naturalised gender structure. Butler argues that drag may appear subversive because culture has deeply naturalised ideas of what gendered bodies are allowed (and not allowed) to wear (173). Yet

these gendered codes are as arbitrary as the ones discussed in chapter two – they are fixed by culture, not nature (Hall, 26). Butler's theory of gender demonstrates how much of what appears 'natural' is actually that which has been 'naturalised', systematically constructed in a way which attempts to remove any signs of this construction.

Fig 3.2. *Still from 'Privilege' (1990), Yvonne Rainer*

In *'Extra-Ordinary Men'* Nicola Rehling argues that white heterosexual masculinity is deeply naturalised in culture, the 'default' identity by which all else is 'othered'. By treating straight white masculinity as "a specifically gendered, raced, and sexual category rather than the dominant, structuring norm" (1), however, Rehling works to reveal the 'seams' of this dominant identity – its signs of construction (6). In other words, in refusing to accept the definition of straight white masculinity as a "seamless identity" (3), Rehling frees herself to interrogate the stability of this gendered category.

One specific idea that Rehling explores is that of ‘embodiment’. She states how “it has been the historical right of moneyed white heterosexual masculinity to represent itself as disembodied” (92). Rehling argues that this appeal to disembodiment effectively supports straight white male dominance, “allowing it to lay claim to the universal identity” (92). Naturally then, any attempts to draw attention to straight white male embodiment represent a threat to its overwhelming dominance in culture.

> Its "corporealization" would necessarily provoke certain anxieties - not only through the inevitable marking of the universal body as a gendered and raced category, but also because of the fact that it would bring that body perilously close to the side of the mind/body binary historically reserved for its others, unsettling those binary operations, and by extension, white patriarchal hegemonic norms (Rehling, 92).

In the light of this insight, it is clear to see how Child’s efforts to reveal the ‘constructedness’ of dominant cinematic form undermines its very dominance. Her work places dominant cinema ‘close to the side’ of the avant-garde, revealing their shared use of form to construct meaning. Films like *‘Mercy’* and *‘Mayhem’ (1987)* (which I will discuss shortly) provide an ‘experiential’ education on the workings of film form, dismantling the power dynamic present in the dominant/*alternative* binary opposition.

Here, it is also possible to consider another distinctly political angle to the way dominant cinema operates, when we consider that which is “naturalised” versus that which is ‘natural’ or real. While dominant cinema often claims to efface its signs of construction for the audience’s sake, so as not to ‘interrupt’ cinematic pleasure or ‘immersion’ in a work, one can now question whether this is actually a *strategy* by which dominant forms sustain themselves. After all, ensuring audiences find formal alternatives ‘disruptive’ to cinematic pleasure allows conventional cinema to maintain a dominant stature and, more insidiously, to ‘naturalise’ a cinematic experience in which audiences consume meaning without an awareness of how it is produced.

3.2.2 *'Mayhem' (1987)* and Embodiment

The experience of watching Child's 1987 film 'Mayhem' is distinctly embodied. The film provides theory on the relationship between genre and form, theory that is *felt* by the audience.

In *'Mayhem'*, Child edits together a mix of dramatic, pornographic and noir film to create a melodrama. By using non-melodramatic footage in this way, Child demonstrates how genre can be conveyed through form - reiterating how meaning is produced by a films structure rather than its 'content'. Her careful construction of sound and montage effectively conveys a *sense* of melodrama – while the shots she selects undoubtably come from different original sources, they are brought together to create an authentically 'melodramatic' piece. Child describes it as an "inverse melodrama" one that uses "the syntax of melodrama without the content, constructing out of parts of the melodramatic vocabulary." (19)

Fig 3.3. *Still from 'Mayhem' (1987), Abigail Child*

Child's choice to employ 'melodrama' as "a structural idea" in *'Mayhem'* is significant. Long considered a 'women's genre' (Miklitsch, 3), defined by "excess and gesture" (Child, 22), melodrama is aptly suited to explore ideas of 'embodiment' and 'the feminine'. The film boldly traverses the lines of the body, its movements and expressions. 'Difference' in *'Mayhem'* is both emphasised and exploded. In one film source, women wear spots while men wear stripes.

Fig 3.4. *Still from 'Mayhem' (1987), Abigail Child*

On the other hand, the film also radically reimagines 'difference' as a concept. 'Different' applications of filmic content demonstrate this. Early Japanese pornographic material is formally reimagined within the melodramatic structure, cut apart and back together to the point that, as a viewer, the cultural meanings and tabooed nature of the footage is almost entirely shaken loose. "Both male and female have the political/aesthetic job to fracture the social conditions we in this present exist in, show up their absurdities— for life as well as gender reasons" (Child, 10).

Interestingly, in *'This is Called Moving'*, Child writes about melodrama as "a response to loss" (22). She talks about how melodrama "gestures, trying to elicit a reality that is not acknowledged. Melodrama is a hot aesthetic, antidotal to the cool posture of Western neutrality (objectivity)" (24). As a genre, melodrama is 'feminised' and thus 'delegitimised' - not to be taken seriously. Yet just as Laura U. Marks critiques how "embodied experience" and "sensuous knowledge" (145) are devalued in academic analysis, Child suggests that melodrama "gestures" to a dominant cultural *repression* of knowledge that is rooted in the body.

It is crucial to note here the nuance of Child's exploration of embodiment. Always "suspicious of a romanticization that can conceal hierarchies of power, or an essentialization that mythifies gender difference" (Gunning, xix), Child explores embodiment not as an inherently 'feminine' quality, but as something 'feminised' by dominant culture – a violent response to the patriarchal fear of the power of embodied knowledge. It is 'feminised' in order to suppress this power, the same way the avant-garde is sub-ordinated by dominant cinema due to fears of its subversive, 'destabilising' force. After all, "sensuous knowledge" is harder to deny.

> Against modernist autonomy, which posits a disembodied truth, purity of form and structure, melodrama presents a skewed and covert social reality: a place of the organ, of emotion, of the body, of disclosure and closure, of doubling, a world couched in what has been situated traditionally as the "feminine." (Child, 24)

Here, the effectiveness of *'Mayhem'* in disrupting the stability of dominant culture's 'fixed meanings' - its arbitrary, "disembodied" truths which are naturalised so that they can be passively consumed - is seen. *'Mayhem'* works to uproot the validity of the male claim to disembodiment by presenting a universal, human tie to the body.

Fig 3.5. *Still from 'Mayhem' (1987), Abigail Child*

Disembodiment is shown as a dominant western cultural value that denies the reality of human embodied experience. It is a value clearly unaligned with the nature of reality, as seen by the prevalence of melodrama in culture: "at its most ambitious (melodrama) brings to the surface areas previously uninvestigated, reflects the fascination and pleasure of exploring the forbidden, serves as a channel to our psychopathologies" (22). Even more importantly, perhaps, is that by creating a film which engenders an embodied response from audiences, Child provides theory on "the intelligence of the body", destabilising the idea that sensuous knowledge is not legitimate, and redefining the feminine 'tie' to embodiment. "What if we no longer view the difference as deficiency, loss, self-effacement and deprivation, but rather as opportunity?" (Bovenschen, 8).

3.1.3 Circumscriptions of Reality

In *'Gender Trouble'*, Judith Butler's task to demonstrate how ideas of 'reality' are produced, reinforced and then reproduced in culture is impelled by their enduring concern with how theories of gender shape the lives of people (xix). Clearly, a theory which draws boundaries atop lived experiences and expressions of gender, devaluing all that falls outside these marked lines, is one with a distinct political angle, and one which Butler recognises as deeply insidious. Their writing explores how "naturalised" views of reality work to enforce 'fixed' definitions of gender. The problem, of course, is that a dominant view of 'reality' which sees gender as fixed clashes "violently" with the truly natural – that is, the broad and varied spectrum of gender representations. For Child, dominant cinema's definition of 'reality' is equally suspect, formally 'narrow' and thus unrepresentative of lived experiences.

Now the question becomes - what is 'reality'? Or, to be a little more specific, what do we mean when we use the term 'reality' in these discussions on film and cultural meaning? Stuart Hall wrote that 'culture' can be thought of in terms of "shared conceptual maps", a shared knowledge of "socially fixed" codes between members of a culture (Hall, 18). Cinematic codes behave like wider cultural codes, in that they 'fix' meaning to allow for shared understanding of 'reality'.

In *'New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics"*, authors Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis talk about definitions of 'cinematic realism' (189), expanding on this idea of cinematic codes. They note how "verisimilitude" (the *appearance* of being real) is often accepted as 'realism' in film because of the "deeply ingrained and widely disseminated" formal codes which audiences have been taught to view as faithful representations of reality (189).

In other words, 'classical' cinema developed a conventional form in which "apparently inessential details" (these reminiscent of Hall's 'arbitrary' signs) serve as "guarantors of authenticity" (Burgoyne et al. 192).

> The representational accuracy of the details was less important than their role in creating the optical illusion of truth. By effacing the signs of their production, "dominant" cinema persuaded spectators to take constructed simulations as transparent renderings of the real (Burgoyne et al. 192).

In *'Film Art'*, the authors note how filmmakers working in the 'classical' narrative tradition tend to present action 'objectively', explaining how "the film will usually present an objective story reality, against which various degrees of perceptual or mental subjectivity can be measured" (Bordwell et al. 99). This story 'reality' is presented as 'objective' despite being heavily informed by conventional cinematic codes. So while Child's use of rapid cutting in *'Mercy'* feels disruptive, it is disruptive of audience expectations rather than film as a 'realistic' medium. After all, 'the cut' is by no means a feature of everyday lived experience - at least not in a literal sense. Yet when editing in film is treated a certain way, one which conforms to conventional codes, audiences are happy to accept a film's definition of 'the real'.

Child highlights how the key issue with 'conventional' definitions is that they fail to reflect reality's subjective nature: "continuity in the Hollywood sense has never seemed true to life to me, not to my experiences, not to memory" (207). Child, like Judith Butler, is concerned with the politics of "naturalised knowledge" - with the fact that "the traditional limits of the form define in a prohibitive way the boundaries of the possible" (xxi) In other words, by laying claim to 'the real', dominant cinema devalues alternative representations of reality, with repercussions that extend far beyond the screening room.

Child writes about how:

> "These very conventions have taken over our idea of romance, are substrate. It's difficult to upend legislated values. They appear "natural", and I invert that, try to go under the natural to say that things are not natural, that there are no givens." (219)

In developing and screening her avant-garde work, Child makes enormous strides in expanding legitimacy for both avant-garde cinema and 'alternative' representations of gender. Moreover, by simply existing, radical formal alternatives destabilise the dominance of conventional structures and their fixed definitions of 'reality'. Dominant cinema may claim it presents audiences with true 'cinematic realism' - but this is disrupted when alternative, poetic filmic forms capture a subjective reality, representing the experience of a moment or feeling in a way which feels authentic. Butler eloquently captures how this idea relates to gender and feminist theory: "those who are deemed "unreal" nevertheless lay hold of the real, a laying hold that happens in concert, and a vital instability is produced by that

performative surprise" (xxvi). Child's avant-garde films thus provide invaluable theory on deconstructing delimiting definitions of reality, those that fail to expand to cover all that truly exists. "It is the existence of the repressed that demands our radicalism. It is not that we are "underneath" and surfacing but that we are part of the surface being denied substance" (Child, 149).

The cultural role of an avant-garde cinema which destabilises "violent circumscriptions of reality" (Butler, xxiii), that provides an antithesis to dominant cinema's fixed meanings, cannot be undervalued.

CONCLUSION

The overarching aim of this thesis is to argue for the crucial cultural role of an 'avant-garde' cinema. Political applications reveal its power in expanding freedoms and legitimacy to those marginalised by dominant societal structures. The avant-garde's discomfort as a 'descriptive' category reflects its enduring relevance to both filmic and broader feminist spheres - by refusing to be tied down, it facilitates constructionist theories of meaning-making that embrace fluidity, experiential knowledge and unfettered forms of expression - all of which work to destabilise the 'naturalised knowledge' and 'fixed meanings' put forward by dominant culture.

Child's work is allied to the radical feminist movement by their shared theory and aims. In uprooting conventional cinema's claim to dominance, Child develops theoretical material robust enough to support a lasting emancipation for marginalised groups. By deconstructing ideas of 'inherent meaning' she contributes to a feminist structure built on new ground, rather than a foundation which lies on an acceptance of essential difference, and thus one which could never support a true liberation. The processes of 'formal disruption' which she develops in her films are tools in the hands of feminist theorists, inspired theory that fuels the movement.

Gunning writes that the "interruptions that experimental art employs make us reassess the world we live in, test and question it against the edge of an unfamiliar artistic experience" (xx). This quote underscores the enduringly crucial role of the avant-garde in culture - it reminds us of the slippery and ever-changing nature of meaning, the necessity of viewing codes as mutable rather than fixed. It urges us to consider how the world constructs our vision.

Avant-garde films encourage us to reimagine the realms of the possible - they "demonstrate that there are other interesting, fulfilling ways to live besides the narrow range of middle-class lives … marketed by so many industry films" (MacDonald, 5). While often dismissed as 'challenging', these films are crucial *because* of the fact they challenge us. James Baldwin said that "any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety" (Anderson). It is understandable that early encounters with the avant-garde feel uncomfortable - that discomfort often masks a potent fear that re-defining our knowledge of the cinematic experience shakes loose our very understanding of reality and 'truth'. Yet engaging with avant-garde films can be viewed as a

moral exercise – it keeps us open, rather than letting us calcify in the ‘fixed’ meanings of dominant culture. It is an experience rife with rewards. After all, if we can embrace more formally challenging films, surely we have opened ourselves up to new realms of cinematic pleasure.

Fig 3.6. *Still from ‘Mercy’ (1989) Abigail Child*

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