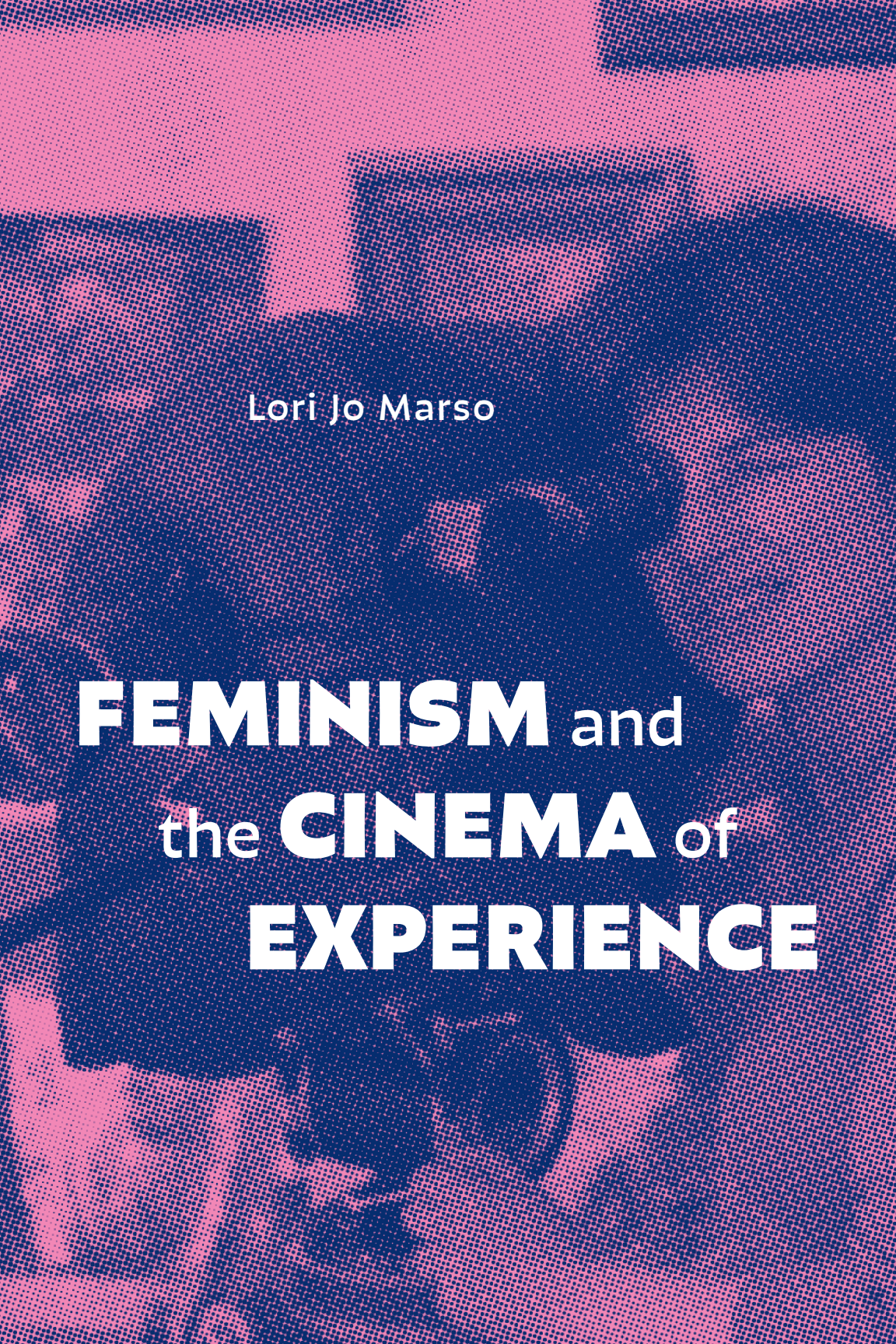




Lori Jo Marso

FEMINISM and
the **CINEMA** of
EXPERIENCE

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BUY

FEMINISM and the **CINEMA** of **EXPERIENCE**

Lori Jo Marso

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Cover art: Chantal Akerman filming *Dis-moi (Tell Me)*, 1980.

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This book is for the students in my “Feminist Film” classes at Union College. Those spaces, and the films, feelings, and conversations we shared, remain with me and are reflected in these pages.

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Acknowledgments

Before expressing my deep appreciation for colleagues, friends, and family, I want to thank several groups of people I've never met but who have shaped my thinking and writing, and to whom I feel connected. Some of these people exist only in fiction, as characters in film and television. My book is about how certain kinds of films and television, because of style and theme, invite the discomfiting and disorienting feelings of their viewers by depicting the experiences of characters on screen. Ambivalence, disgust, cringe, tenderness, pity, horror, the sharing of trauma, existential angst, joy—these are some of the many feelings that get stirred up as viewers feel with and against characters in a cinema of experience. I feel connected to these characters! Experiencing these experiences, which I may or may not have had myself, and feeling these difficult feelings often makes me feel less alone in my existential dilemmas and strong emotions, as they envelop me in their collective energy.

The creation of film and television is always a collective endeavor, and I want to acknowledge the many people who write, film, produce, adapt, edit, and do all the other tasks involved in bringing to fruition the film and television that inspire, antagonize, or somehow move me. Likewise, I'm grateful to curators, podcasters, critics, and members and supporters of institutions that are involved in creating spaces and opportunities for film lovers like me to gather in public to encounter cinema. With others in these

spaces, we can share space and feelings too—feelings that, like the ones I explore in this book, can be hard to name but are sometimes contagious. But sometimes not: you start talking to the stranger next to you in the theater, or you read a review, or you chat with your friends, to discover that we were *not* sharing the same feelings at all, and the space of sharing becomes one of agonism, encounter, politics, and imagination.

Several of the films I include in my cinema of experience, and the great majority of the films I teach in my “Feminist Film” course, were first encountered (or re-encountered) in collective viewings at Film at Lincoln Center’s New York Film Festival (NYFF), Rendez-Vous with French Cinema, and New Directors/New Films; and by attending film series and retrospectives sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), Anthology Film Archives, Film Forum, the Metrograph, and the International Film Center.

I first saw Chantal Akerman’s *No Home Movie* in early October 2015 at the NYFF, and I was especially looking forward to her introduction of the film, as I had long admired Akerman and had been regularly teaching *Jeanne Dielman*, *News from Home*, and *Je tu il elle* in my classes. But that was not to be, as Akerman died of suicide in Paris just two days before that screening. The film begins with a nearly four-minute shot of a barren tree buffeted by wind (for a screenshot, see figure 1.6). These first moments onscreen—in a film that charts the aging and deterioration of Akerman’s mother—moved me in ways that I am still trying to figure out. Seeing the film for the first time, I was struck by how disturbing, inexplicable, intimate feelings can be invited and heightened by the least sentimental and most abstract objects and choices, and how films can touch your life in ways unexpected and transformative. That screening of *No Home Movie* was the beginning of this book. In the first year or two after Akerman’s death, retrospectives of her work were sponsored by Film at Lincoln Center, BAM, and MoMA. These events gave me the opportunity to see many of her difficult-to-find films in the company of appreciative and grieving audiences, and on the big screen.

I am very lucky to be part of a family of political and feminist theorists whose writing, and individual and collective camaraderie, helped me bring this book to fruition. Bonnie Honig has talked with me for countless hours about films, feminism, and political theory. I have an entire desk drawer filled with scribbled notes containing eureka insights gleaned from conversations with Bonnie on the phone, over email, by text, on long walks, in subways, in taxis and Ubers, and during meals. Some of these notes are written on napkins and theater programs. When talking with Bonnie, a

work breakthrough can strike anywhere and anytime, spurred by our mutual appreciation of a Broadway show or being antagonized by a bad movie. I have learned so much from her work in political and feminist theory, and I am grateful for our friendship.

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Longtime friends Mort Schoolman, George Shulman, Joshua Dienstag, Jason Frank, and Mark Reinhardt have each written important works on aesthetics—film, fiction, art, and photography—and have each generously read my work-in-progress, written me long emails, conversed, laughed, and dined with me, always in these contexts helping me think in creative and generative ways about the intersections of art and politics.

When Lawrie Balfour asked Jill Frank and me to be consulting editors for *Political Theory*, I anticipated the often difficult, occasionally controversial, frequently boring but at times creative work of editing, but what I didn't anticipate was how meeting in person or over Zoom to have conversations about our writing projects and everything else would become, particularly during COVID, a vitally important intellectual lifeline. In lively exchanges with Lawrie and Jill, I was freed to think about my chapters in new ways (for example, creating stand-alone interpretations of the films), and they soothed my anxieties about making claims about my strong feelings. Lawrie also took the time and energy to provide incredibly insightful feedback on the entire manuscript in its first draft, which further buttressed my resolve to keep moving forward with the project.

Torrey Shanks, Laurie Naranch, and Patricia Moynagh are co-conspirators in all topics and situations related to feminist theory (and beyond). Torrey revealed herself to me as one of the anonymous readers for this manuscript, and I thank her and my other (still anonymous, also brilliant) reader for their generous, close readings and inspired suggestions, all oriented toward helping me draw out and emphasize the most important aspects of my own way of thinking about film and feminism. Çiğdem Çıdam and Guillermina Seri have taught me about Proust, Barthes, Benjamin, memory, political organizing and activism, how to persevere in the face of adversity and keep good cheer, and much more. I also thank Union colleagues Andrea

Foroughi, Joyce Madancy, Zoe Oxley, Erika Nelson Mukherjee, and Jenelle Troxell for their friendship, steady counsel, trust, and good times over the years.

Over drinks one late afternoon in Montreal, Jane Bennett gave me the courage to follow my instincts to see what I might find by acknowledging and exploring the differences in the ways Chantal Akerman and Simone de Beauvoir approach experience. Jane's writing, as well as her orientation to work, life, and basically all things, inspires and resonates with me, and I feel very lucky to have her in my life.

Courtney Berger, editor extraordinaire, has been my editor and friend for many years. Courtney has talked with me about *this* book in particular over several meals, in many cities, on Zoom and on the phone, and in exchanging countless emails. I am extremely fortunate to have Courtney in my corner and to benefit from her vision and advice. I am also indebted to the care and expertise of Livia Tenzer and Laura Jaramillo at Duke University Press, who shepherded this book into being in its final stages. Annie Berke, film editor for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, deserves a special shout-out for her keen intelligence, line edits, brilliant title ideas, and good humor. My readings of *Titane*, *Happening*, and *Barbie* began in conversation with Annie.

Funding from the Faculty Research Fund at Union College enabled me to travel to West Texas in March 2023, to visit Marfa, the film site for Joey Soloway's *I Love Dick*, discussed in chapter 4. Tom Lobe and I dined in the restaurant that is the setting for the dinner between Chris, Sylvère, and Dick where Dick tells Chris, "Unfortunately, most films made by women aren't that good"; we wandered the town to see the walls and shopfronts where Chris posted her letters to Dick; and we hung out in the bar where Chris was ordered home by Sylvère after her wild dancing. Most memorable and transformative was encountering, in person, the work of Donald Judd, Soloway's inspiration for the character of Dick. I had seen Judd's work in MoMA's 2021 exhibit of his colorful "boxes" and "stacks," and this was a very moving experience for me. But walking around and feeling the presence of Judd's massive sculptures on the Chihuahuan desert border between Texas and Mexico, walking among his one hundred boxes of mill aluminum (41 × 71 × 52 inches) housed by the Chinati Foundation in a shuttered army base enveloped by desert views, and seeing his paintings, drawings, and furniture in the downtown Marfa studio stunned and amazed me in ways I have trouble putting into language. My encounters with Judd's work have

made me feel more intensely the many ways that Chris might love Dick in Soloway's series, and to think more expansively about the way "Dick's" art can seem to take up all the space, but at the same time still *make* space for more.

I was delighted to be invited to present work-in-progress at Political Theory Workshops and other venues over the years I was developing the argument and trying to see the shape of this book. These opportunities, listed below, and the several interlocutors who attended, stopped me from making major mistakes, and offered me their good ideas are very appreciated:

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In addition to sewing my Barbie clothes and the many other ways she cared for me when I was young, my mother, Jo Marso, attended my University of Edinburgh Zoom lecture on Akerman’s “camerawork motherwork,” and prepared several on-point questions so she would be ready if she were called upon to ask them. My daughter Luci Lobe read this entire manuscript in one of its later drafts, was brutally honest about what did not quite come together, and talked with me for hours about how to say things better. Even after she completed this enormous task, I continue to force her into multiple conversations about everything from *Middlemarch* to the television series *Poldark*, and her sharp insights are all over this book. My son Lucas Lobe helped me with screen grabs and all things art-related and challenges almost everything I say about any film. Conversations about art and film with May Parsey make me smarter, and her ridiculous puns always make me laugh. Along with Luci and May, Danielle Powell and Rita Siebels shared my enthusiasm for Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* in the summer of 2023 and each of them brought my attention to details in the film that I did not see.

I come up short on words to thank Tom Lobe for his abiding love and steadfast cheerleading, not to mention his always insightful counsel and conversation about film, politics, theater, and everything else. Tom’s support

has been my anchor for too many years and in too many ways to count. As postscript, I would be remiss if I failed to mention that our adored dogs, Taki, Zucchini, and Guaka, are always ready with the most excellent cuddles, unwavering good cheer, and unbridled enthusiasm for treats, belly rubs, walks, and sniffing. The dogs and Tom share a love for me and love of life that is always needed and appreciated, but especially so on the most difficult days.

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INTRODUCTION: FEELING LIKE A FEMINIST

feeling: an emotional state or reaction; a sense that something is true

feminist: participant in feelings and activities committed to dismantling patriarchal, racist, capitalist, and extractive practices, and imagining new ways of living and ways of relating intimately in sex, love, family, and friendship

FEELING LIKE A FEMINIST most often doesn't feel good. Feeling like a feminist provokes anxiety, summons deep ambivalence to norms of femininity, and triggers worry and confusion about sex, love, marriage, children, and friendship.¹ It can be upsetting to notice that the roles, relationships, proj-

ects, and even futures that girls and women have been taught to strive for, to hold on to, to cherish, are the very ones that solidify women's status as what Simone de Beauvoir calls "the second sex."² It can also feel very disorienting to discover our (unchosen, structural) connections to other women, to recognize that our actions and failures to act harm others, and to slowly or suddenly understand that we may have unwittingly chosen our own harm. It seldom feels good or empowering to learn we are each assigned locations within racist, capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal, extractive (of people and nature) structures that have deep interests in concealing these connections and these interests.³ But while feeling like a feminist is most often uncomfortable, getting glimpses of possible feminist futures buried within our own present tense, waiting to be summoned, can bring an unexpected surge of joy.

I have studied the complicated feelings of feminists in the autobiographies and biographies of key feminist thinkers (Marso 2006), I have felt them in my own life, and I have tried to work through them with students in classrooms. I have written about these feelings and the books, films, movements, and reflections they have inspired. Always, I insist that there is no *one* definition of feminism.⁴ There are several "feminisms," reflecting ongoing debates and actions in historic and contemporary struggles for the liberation of woman-identified subjects.⁵ These conversations vitalize and revitalize the movement across geographies and history, and in the here and now. But the feminism to which I subscribe is antiracist, anticapitalist, anti-extractive. The quest for women's freedom must be collective and relational, rather than focused on the individual. Feeling like a feminist is not the appropriate position of bourgeois white feminism, nor is it the feeling good of what is called "choice" feminism (i.e., as long as I choose it, it's feminist).⁶ Keeping with the definition of "freedom in the encounter" that I developed studying the writings and actions of Beauvoir, I insist that no one is free until all are free, that we can only be free together, even as I recognize that there are conflicts among differently situated women that are not only agonistic, but likely irresolvable (Marso 2017). These are some of the difficulties and the ambivalences of feeling like a feminist.

Turning my attention explicitly to feminist aesthetic forms, the individual and collective experiences they depict, and the feelings they invite, I argue in this book that to feel like a feminist demands a willingness to encounter and acknowledge feelings we would rather push away.⁷ These feelings might result from trauma we have denied, relationships we would rather ignore, or what cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) has called

“cruel optimism”—the mistaken belief that attachments to the things that diminish us can make us happy. Feeling like a feminist crushes cruel optimism. Feeling like a feminist offers fraught community, but not individual empowerment.⁸ Feeling like a feminist destroys any certainty that the arc of history is bending in the right direction. Feminist waves never move without undertow (Marso 2010). But in spite of all this, feeling like a feminist can also incite laughter and make us feel a kind of collective giddiness!⁹ To feel good in *these* ways (collectively, in struggle), however, is not our usual way of feeling good.

At the undergraduate liberal arts college in upstate New York where I teach, I have offered a feminist film course for roughly ten years, mostly to women (sometimes there are a few men) that is cross-listed in the fields of Political Science, Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies, Africana Studies, and/or American Studies, depending on the films, directors, and texts assigned. I change the syllabus every time. It has focused solely on French avant-garde filmmakers and solely on films directed by American women of color; sometimes it is a mix of Hollywood, European, and foreign films from across the globe. In the years before I crafted this course, I curated an on-campus “Women in the Movies” film series screened weekly in the spring trimesters. The “Women in the Movies” series included all kinds of films, not all directed by women—foreign, American independent, classic Hollywood, and avant-garde. I often included some (derogatorily called) “chick flicks” or romantic comedies, and the screenings were always followed by discussions.

I estimate that over the years I have discussed more than two hundred films with my students. The classroom has become for me a kind of experiential site for watching and talking about films with others, registering how cinema matters to the ways I theorize “feeling like a feminist.” In the course, the films some of my students like the most are ones where the characters overcome the odds, inspire, dazzle, outsmart, accomplish, and succeed. Think of Reese Witherspoon as Elle in *Legally Blonde* (2001), a stereotypical feel-good feminist film that proves women can do anything, not by mimicking men but *as women*. Dressed in pink from head to toe, Elle wins her legal case because she knows that you cannot shower with newly permed hair.¹⁰ Woe to those who discount women! Do not underestimate women’s embodied knowledge and our connections to our (sorority) sisters!

Others of my students tend to like films that make them feel bad. Eliza Hittman’s *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020) is one such film. Finding herself pregnant, working-class teenager Autumn (Sidney Flanigan) tries to

abort on her own. When this fails, she and her cousin Skylar (Talia Ryder) travel from rural Pennsylvania to New York City to procure an abortion. The giant suitcase they drag around the city from the Port Authority to various Planned Parenthood clinics is a symbol of not only the situational baggage they carry but also their struggle to navigate while lugging it. Several students identify and sympathize with Autumn's predicament, are frustrated by the obstacles the two teens meet, and feel angry as they are confronted by various forms of toxic masculinity all around them. *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* brings the two young women to life so realistically that viewers are easily able to identify with them.

The films many of my students tend not to like are the ones that make them feel things they have a hard time describing or categorizing. These are films that they need to be persuaded to appreciate after working through the reading and participating in discussion. These films take viewers places that my students, like the rest of us, do not want to go and will visit only very reluctantly. These films disorient in several ways, sometimes thematically, sometimes stylistically, often both. They might feature women who inhabit the margins of the category "women," or women who too directly or too obviously betray the demands of femininity (unattractive, angry, sad, unlucky in love, or in some way embarrassing). They surprise and often frustrate viewer expectations by featuring a stationary or unfocused camera, discordant noise or silence, long takes or too many cuts, unexplained or confusing images, music that fails to give viewers emotional cues, editing that scrambles the narrative, or narratives that frustrate viewer desire to detect clear messages and morals. In other words, they use discomfiting and disorienting style and narrative to invite viewers to feel like feminists.¹¹

My examples from film and television summon discomfiting feelings, feelings we would rather not confront or even acknowledge, as they depict uncomfortable but common experiences for woman-identified subjects—ambivalence, stasis, horror, cringe, and plasticity. My examples deliberately refuse to offer accomplished and inspiring role models, to comfort, and to partake in the forms of representation that increase what we have come to call diversity. This book asks what is going on when we can't take our eyes off, or we *must* look away from, horror movies, cringy television, durational scenes of female anxiety, and other varieties of uncomfortable, discomfiting scenes.¹² My examples offer a way to feel and think our way through and about these encounters, as I insist that they are worthy of our feminist political attention. They offer tastes, sounds, moods, fleeting images, durational focus, ambiance, atmosphere, or architecture that cap-

ture the “real” of marginalized experiences and help viewers sense what freedom (existential, relational, antiracist, nonhierarchical) might feel like. The films and television I explore within these pages (there could be many more examples!) belong to my cinema of experience because their formal and narrative styles invite viewers to cinematically experience women’s experiences as an appeal to feeling.

When I call my archive a “cinema of experience,” some readers may think of Miriam Bratu Hansen’s book, *Cinema and Experience* (2012) on Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno. In the book’s preface, Hansen says that the concept of experience emphasized by thinkers in the critical theory tradition on which she draws is one where individual lived experience is recognized in its collective and relational dimensions marked by the fragmentation, alienation, and blockage that characterize life in modern capitalism. Hansen says cinema can be a kind of “public sphere,” where viewers can “mobilize their own experience,” to understand it differently and imagine different futures (2012, xiv). Likewise, the emphasis on experience in the work of phenomenological film theorist Vivian Sobchack is also important for me as she highlights experience “in the flesh” as the concrete foundation for a distinctly materialist and “bottom-up emergence of aesthetic and ethical sense” (2004, 3). Exploring the “reality” of screen images in an image-saturated culture to ask about how these images “touch” us, Sobchack builds on the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to discuss (generic) embodied, involuntary (affective) responses to film, theorizing cinema as an “expression of experience by experience” (1992, 3).

My turn to the writings of Simone de Beauvoir builds on the works of Hansen and Sobchack. With Beauvoir and with Chantal Akerman, I bring attention to how structures of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy are bolstered by aesthetic objects that reproduce, circulate, and make attractive certain feelings but can be challenged by aesthetic objects that offer new ways to feel and imagine. Beauvoir is especially good at attuning us to the impacts of the male sensorium (and male common sense) on the bodies of those who are perceived and identify as girls and women.¹³ I add to Beauvoir’s astute observations about the male sensorium an exploration of how we can identify and feel these impacts in the holding spaces made available in a feminist cinema of experience, as exemplified in the cinema of Chantal Akerman.

As I write this book, I imagine myself as saying “yes” to Hansen’s 1986 invitation to feminist film scholars and critics to interpret cinema through a feminist lens. By that, she means a lens that seeks out moments and spaces

for resistance, a practice Beauvoir expressly prepared us for in *The Second Sex*, and that Akerman's uses of camera, sound, editing, and play with genre and color attune us to in the most remarkable ways. Akerman is the filmmaker who, for me, best typifies the aesthetic, affective, and political work from which we can begin to learn to feel like feminists.

(with) Chantal Akerman

Chantal Akerman released her first feature-length film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, in 1975 when she was only twenty-five years old. Toward the end of 2022, it was named as *Sight and Sound* magazine's "greatest film of all time." The poll that decided this, which has occurred once every decade for seventy years, was taken by 1,639 film critics, academics, curators, archivists, and programmers.¹⁴ Akerman's film, the first winner directed by a woman, displaced Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), which held the top spot for ten years, and Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), which topped the list for fifty years. This is a significant achievement for feminist film and for women directors. Upon release of the news, film scholar Laura Mulvey (2022) remarked, "Things will never be the same."

Although never recognized so broadly as upon release of this 2022 list, Akerman was one of the first, and remains one of the most significant and critically acclaimed, filmmakers in what is now a more-than-fifty-year history of feminist alternatives to a male-dominated media scene. Feminist directors, film critics, and theorists have collectively contributed to efforts to disrupt the male gaze and its cultural sensorium, and to diversify characters and their experiences to reflect, represent, and inspire our own as viewers. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, groundbreaking feminist filmmakers fused radical aesthetics with radical politics, even when they, like Akerman, refused modifiers such as "feminist," "lesbian," or "queer."¹⁵ From 1968 with her first short film *Saute ma ville* (*Blow Up My Town*), and until her death in 2015, Akerman's themes, style, and characters—and her specific use of camera, sound, editing, and expansion and play with genre—exemplify, for me, a cinema of experience. Akerman's cinematic style, and its reverberations in contemporary film and television, summons complex feelings intertwined with longing for feminist transformation by depicting the experiences of women and girls in startling and discomfiting ways. Akerman's attention to bodily gesture and inscrutable or unreadable faces, her framing of shots from midrange, often with a static camera, and her expectation that viewers will endure very long shots, disorienting edit-

ing, and innovative use of sound can place us in uncomfortable situations vis-à-vis our relationship to characters, plot, narrative, and our own expectations. Actors and characters defy our quest to know their inner thoughts, and we have no access to their interiorities as we watch them navigate the gaps that exist between themselves and others, and those within themselves.

Published the same year that *Jeanne Dielman* was released, Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) named the male gaze and drew feminist attention to the nexus of Hollywood cinema, commodity culture, spectacle, and the white female star, raising consciousness about the passivity of female spectators in our "to be looked at" status as objects of the gaze. Mulvey's article named as culprit not only the cinematic apparatus, or the objectifying look of the camera, but also the structure of a certain kind of narrative itself—the familiar (and familial) arc of beginning, middle, and end whose signposts are determined by a gendered structure of reproductive patriarchy. She insisted that the only way for feminist filmmakers to counter the male gaze and break these pernicious myths was to take up avant-garde filmmaking, eschewing narrative to create radical new film forms to alter our way of seeing. Akerman did just that with *Jeanne Dielman*. As Mulvey (2022) puts it,

The film that collected the most votes in 2022 is made with a cinematic style and strategy closer to avant-garde than mainstream traditions and, furthermore, at just under three and a half hours, demands dedicated viewing. Although confrontational, idiosyncratic and extraordinary films have consistently appeared lower in the lists, the experimental tradition, to which *Jeanne Dielman* belongs, is—apart perhaps from the recent appearance of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)—absent. While it has brought this tradition to the top of the list, *Jeanne Dielman* is inescapably a woman's film, consciously feminist in its turn to the avant garde. . . . In a film that, agonisingly, depicts women's oppression, Akerman transforms cinema, itself so often an instrument of women's oppression, into a liberating force.

D

Focusing static cameras on the ordinary housework, mothering, and prostituting that one opaque woman performs over the course of three days, *Jeanne Dielman* completely upends viewer expectations. First, film length: as Mulvey notes, it clocks in at three hours and twenty minutes. The length of the film might be received by some as a violation of regular time and timing.

Film theorist Daniella Shreir (2019) calls it an act of “feminist arrogance”: an insistence to take up space in the heteropatriarchal cinematic sphere. Taking up our time as viewers and inviting us to feel time with Jeanne (in 1975) still today remains a kind of “feminist arrogance,” even and especially as the willingness of contemporary male filmmakers to boldly take up our time in this way proliferates—think of Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet* (1996), Martin Scorsese’s *The Irishman* (2019), and Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer* (2023). Scene duration also scrambles our sense of how time passes in films.¹⁶ Viewers watch Jeanne (played by the amazing Delphine Seyrig) perform household duties such as cleaning the bathtub, making coffee, tidying the bed, and boiling potatoes, and we stay with her, task by task, for each action, all of which extend well over one minute, many two minutes or more, and some as long as four minutes.¹⁷ In the BFI Film Classics text on *Jeanne Dielman*, film scholar Catherine Fowler calls this Akerman’s “phenomenological obsession . . . with how the lived body occupies and moves through space” (2021, 32). The subject matter is also new—the life of a widow caring for her home and her son, while also working as a prostitute in her Brussels apartment. Also noteworthy are the unmoving midrange camera placement, the flat monotone of line delivery, spare dialogue, awkward Oedipal mother-and-son conversations. The focus on housework, the confinement of the “action” to one small apartment, and the slow pace confirm film theorist Ivone Margulies’s characterization of this film, and much of Akerman’s oeuvre, as cinema in which “nothing happens.”¹⁸

But then something does. After tracking the hours in three long days, Jeanne commits an inexplicable, violent act: killing a john (client) with scissors. Is this act an attempt to disrupt (or preserve?) the order of time in which she has been ensconced? As I surmised earlier (Marso 2016a), it might be characterized as a “perverse protest” against patriarchal mandates and expectations. Film scholar Alice Blackhurst cites film critic Elena Gorfinkel’s attention to the “cruelties of subsisting in the exhaustion of just being, in facing, time and again, the circumscribed terms of [a woman’s] value, a value defined by men, by capitalism, by law,” as she concludes that Jeanne refuses these standards to instead become a “luxurious outlaw” (2021, 17). Regardless of viewer and critic speculation regarding what motivates Jeanne’s act of violence, the film itself never settles this question, nor does it settle the significance of the orgasm we see Jeanne experience just prior to the murder. All we ever “know” in an Akerman film is what we can observe.¹⁹ What we can observe about this film is Akerman’s commitment to explore a different sense of time, space, and desire.²⁰ What may be most

uncomfortable for viewers is not the killing itself but rather the aftermath, when we sit with Jeanne at her kitchen table in silence for seven long minutes before the credits roll. This may be the most anxious and difficult space in the film. In this space and time, viewers are forced to feel time passing.²¹ Light rhythmically illuminates Jeanne's unreadable face as a blue neon search lamp swings outside the window.

Akerman's films, and the iterations of her style and themes in contemporary feminist media, are ones that make the everyday and ordinary appear and *feel* strange. This strangeness, what we might call the "mood" of her films, evokes complicated feelings for viewers. Akerman (1983) said she doesn't have an "idea" that she seeks to explore in her films, but instead a "feeling" she tries to express. In an interview, Akerman notes the influence of filmmaker Michael Snow on her work: "the sensory experience I underwent was extraordinarily powerful and physical. . . . I learned [from Snow's films] that a camera movement . . . could trigger an emotional response as strong as from any narrative" (Brenez 2012). Lengthy shots featuring empty interiors, minor gestures, unreadable faces, and seemingly uninteresting household objects invite unexpected feelings as they direct our attention to things we otherwise might not notice.²² Lack of plot and character development can make minds wander, freeing eyes and ears to be more aware of lighting, any change in expression, sound, or shifts in mood or gesture. Soliciting feeling by focus on detail, space, and mood takes precedence over character, plot, subjective perspective, and narrative closure. In *Jeanne Dielman*, a missed button, overboiled potatoes, an uncovered tureen, and mussed hair become major plot points that trigger anxiety. Viewers do not know whether Jeanne is anxious, but we feel our own anxiety and ambivalence triggered by her actions and comportment onscreen. As I will demonstrate in coming chapters, Akerman's careful work with formal techniques—such as creation of distance and proximity; focus on faces and objects; a privileging of indecipherable scenes, conversations, and actions; and scene duration—can make viewers wiggle, squirm, and possibly want to leave the theater or look away from the screen. These formal innovations combined with often difficult subject matter invite uncomfortable viewer feelings and can culminate in surprisingly emotional viewer reactions.

Akerman's films might be seen as inflected by the surreal, if we think of surrealism with filmmaker Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich as intensifying the usually unseen horrors and "sordid antinomies of the present" for marginalized subjects, while sometimes "enabl[ing] us to transcend" them.²³ We can think of Akerman's style, too, with film theorist Mieke Bal, as producing

what Bal (2013) calls “thinking images.” “Thinking images,” as Bal defines them, invite viewers into worlds from a plurality of perspectives. Akerman never privileges point-of-view perspective with her camera, but her films nevertheless invite us, with Bal, *to think*. And here, I note, that to *feel* like a feminist does not exclude but, instead, *encourages* thinking! I reject the mind/body, thinking/feeling duality as any feminist should. Akerman’s films are intensely cerebral and exquisitely, often painfully, emotional at the same time. They encourage us to question the reality we think we know, to see or hear what we have long missed, and understand that “reality” is itself a construction formed through relationships of power, ideologies, and aesthetics. She heightens the ordinary and the everyday, using her camera to see things we otherwise would not. For these reasons, Margulies (1996) calls Akerman’s filmmaking “hyper-realist.” Viewing an Akerman film, we are not allowed to forget that there is a person behind the camera, that film is a material medium, and that film can be a collective praxis. Reading Akerman’s films as aesthetic objects and feminist project, we can say that women’s contradictory and complex experiences under patriarchy are made newly available for critique and feeling.²⁴

In this book, I name my own way of thinking about Akerman’s distinct style and cinematic lexicon, theorizing her camerawork as an aesthetic form of the labor of mothering. I call this “motherwork camerawork” and “camerawork motherwork” (both orderings of adjective to noun inspired by Akerman’s specific camerawork and Black feminist writing on motherwork). Historically and philosophically excluded from the normative identity of “mother,” Black feminist thinkers have used “motherwork” to identify a set of techniques and practices. Using this term, we can move away from sorting “good” and “bad” mothers, open space to see the violence and care that are inextricably linked in motherwork, and better notice that motherwork is happening where we otherwise do not see it, such as with Akerman’s camerawork. In chapter 1, I read three of Akerman’s films that feature the work of mothers and (m)others. I notice how Akerman’s camera creates and holds space for viewers to encounter difficult experiences, feel the difficult feelings such encounters invite, and hold them in the space and time of the film. I develop this way of theorizing Akerman’s aesthetic style across her oeuvre, and I notice “camerawork motherwork” in the aesthetic style of other filmmakers as well, such as Alice Diop’s *Saint Omer* (2022).

Akerman’s over fifty films and fifteen installations span from 1968 to 2015. In these pages, I carefully read four of the films (and refer to several others). In addition to *Jeanne Dielman*, I include the thirteen-minute short

Blow Up My Town; a documentary about Mexicans and Americans on the border, *De l'autre côté* (*From the Other Side*; 2002); and her final feature film, a genre-bending documentary in the style of a “home movie,” named *No Home Movie* (2015). To the Akerman films, I add feminist films and television series that I read with Akerman as iterations of her cinematic lexicon, even though at first glance, some of them may not appear to fit. The theoretical work I do in each chapter shows that Akerman’s uses of camera and sound, and her innovative play with genre, temporality, duration, framing, and color, prompt viewer discomfort (and often confusion), which creates space and time for difficult feelings. Difficult feelings also take pride of place in the writings, and reception, of Beauvoir, the feminist thinker to whom I turn as I think about the significance of the evocation of experience and feeling to move toward feminist transformation.

(and) Simone de Beauvoir

In recent iterations of my feminist film course, I have assigned several Akerman films and their contemporary iterations and asked my students to read the entirety of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* ([1949] 2011) alongside them.²⁵ *The Second Sex* generates almost as much anxiety as the most formally challenging of Akerman’s films.²⁶ Significantly and disconcertingly, Beauvoir’s primary and recurring question, “What is a woman?” is never answered in its almost eight hundred pages. *The Second Sex* defies expectations of what a feminist project should be. Beauvoir rejects all preformed knowledge of the existence of feminism’s subject (women); she frustrates the naming of a singular origin of oppression; and she eschews the listing of clear and nameable desires, or desired strategies or outcomes for the end of patriarchy. This is profoundly unsettling for students. As the class goes on, the text continues, and the films accumulate, answers to the question “What is a woman?” emerge as a matter of performance, style, and aesthetics, rather than something to be discovered, known, dissected, or even dismantled.

In these and more ways, Beauvoir deliberately frustrates reader desires.²⁷ But at the same time, and with Akerman, woman-identified readers and viewers are being nurtured. It is as if, as readers, we don’t know we “are” women or that we experienced something resembling (or different from, but vaguely familiar to) Beauvoir’s account of “girlhood” *until* we read about it in her pages (or see, hear, and feel it in an Akerman film). Beauvoir opens her book by saying she “hesitated a long time before writing a book on woman. . . . [A]re there even women?” ([1949] 2011, 3). “Does the word

‘woman,’ then, have no content?” (4). In volume 1, Beauvoir records her research, having read volumes of male-authored science, myths, fairytales, anthropology, history, psychoanalysis, theology, literature, and more. Male authors confidently create images of the “eternal feminine,” which veer between the beautiful and the ugly. Studying the language men use to create idealized pictures of the feminine in nature, myth, and life, my students and I notice how attentive Beauvoir is to the power of images.²⁸ In the first paragraph of the “Biology” chapter, Beauvoir says the word “female” immediately brings to mind several “ugly” pictures: “an enormous round egg snatching and castrating the agile sperm; monstrous and stuffed, the queen termite reigning over the servile males; the praying mantis and the spider, gorged on love, crushing their partners and gobbling them up; the dog in heat running through back alleys, leaving perverse smells in her wake; the monkey showing herself off brazenly, sneaking away with flirtatious hypocrisy” (21). The multitude of images with which women must contend makes a long list: the “virtuous” woman (92); “blessed saint” and “docile servant” (189); the “mother” (190); the “mother-in-law image of decrepitude” (192); the “Virgin Mary” (197); and the “bad women” of Hollywood—“adventuress,” “vamp,” “femme fatale,” and “Circe” (207). Decrying how these images affect young women, Beauvoir says, “Through compliments and admonishments, through images and words, she discovers the meaning of the words ‘pretty’ and ‘ugly’; she soon knows that to please, she has to be ‘pretty as a picture’; she tries to resemble an image, she disguises herself, she looks at herself in the mirror, she compares herself to princesses and fairies from tales” (293).

Les belles images, a novel Beauvoir published in 1966, describes the effects of “pretty pictures” circulating in public. This short novel eerily anticipates the ways neoliberal conditions of capitalism, patriarchy, and consumerism combine to capture (differently situated) women in their pernicious net to dictate how women should look and act. Circulating like a contagion, images of wealth and beauty promise that more and more beautiful things bring happiness and that there are technocratic solutions to the deleterious environmental and ethical impacts of capitalist glut. Laurence, the heroine of the novel, creates advertising copy (the “pretty pictures” of the title) that manufacture the longing for consumer objects that promises to stave off the abyss of alienation and angst: “I am not selling wood panels; I am selling security, success, and a touch of poetry into the bargain” ([1966] 1968, 28). Assessing her novel in her 1972 volume of her autobiography, Beauvoir sounds almost like a filmmaker: she says that with her novel, she had wanted to “reproduce the *sound*” of Laurence’s environment, the “ugliness

of [this] world” ([1972] 1993, 122, emphasis added). It reads today as a prescient account of one woman’s damaged sense of self in a dystopian future saturated with and dominated by superficial images of beauty. Today Laurence would be cast as an “influencer.”²⁹ Or she might be cast as a character named Jeanne (once again) played by Delphine Seyrig (once again) in a 1986 Akerman film, *Window Shopping* (also known as *Golden Eighties*). Rather than emphasize the “ugliness” of this world, as Beauvoir chose to do, Akerman saturates her images with bright colors, which, in the coda, I will compare with the Barbie pink that Greta Gerwig uses for *Barbie* (2023). *Window Shopping* is a musical set in a shopping mall (we never leave the mall, until the final moments of the film). Characters move from dress shop to beauty parlor to soda fountain singing about love, betrayal, jealousies, and longing for a better life. We see, with Akerman, that “everything is for sale, everything is desirable if beautifully presented in a shop window, if desire is about how one looks, how one presents oneself” (Roberts 2014). This was Akerman’s first “commercial” film, and with it, she travels a long distance from the austere *Jeanne Dielman*. Film critic Jonathan Kaplan notices that “Akerman’s melodramatic declarations of lost love are siphoned through a repetitive procedure which empties them of their ‘truth,’ their ability to solicit the empathetic response.”³⁰ We might say that her repetitive and attractive images show how representation is made and how it circulates, something that Beauvoir noticed, too, as she focused her attention on Hollywood and what images can and cannot do.

In *America Day by Day*, a text written almost twenty years before *Les belles images* and around the same time as *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir confesses to her love of movies and her fascination with Hollywood in particular. Cinema gave her a picture of life in the United States: “It was through these Black and White images that I first knew America, and I still think of them as its real substance” ([1954] 1999, 74). Beauvoir was an avid and enthusiastic moviegoer all her life. But she initially dismissed the idea that cinema could have a progressive political impact, not only because of the film industry’s tie to profit, but also because she thought that moving images, sometimes “enchancing,” sometimes “unbearable,” are “paralysing” ([1972] 1993, 177). Viewers of film are held within the grip of Hollywood’s profit motive, the movie’s narrative, or the director’s intention, she surmised. Beauvoir maintained this view for a long time. As late as 1972, she affirmed,

The potency of images comes from the fact that they provide the illusion of reality, an illusion that I accept in a state of near-passivity. . . .

When I go into a cinema, I leave my actual self at the door; and although my past is certainly there behind me as I react to a film, it is not there as a conscious entity and my only project is to watch the scenes that go by before my eyes. I accept them as true, and I am not allowed to intervene in any way; my praxis is paralysed, and in some cases this paralysis emphasizes the unbearable nature of the pictures, while in others it makes them enchanting. Sitting there in front of the screen I surrender myself entirely, as I do in dreams; and in this case too, it is visual images that hold me captive—that is why cinema awakens *dream-like echoes* in each beholder. If a film affects me deeply, it does so either because it stirs unformulated memories or because it brings unspoken hopes back to life. Sometimes, when I discuss a film with friends—friends whose tastes are the same as mine in other fields—I find that my opinion is quite unlike theirs: the film has certainly touched them or me or all of us in some intimate, entirely personal area. ([1972] 1993, 177, emphasis mine)

Even as Beauvoir worried that cinematic images are too tied to capitalism, and to the director's or screen's control of story, action, and intention, she also saw that cinema can touch each of us in a deep place, stirring "unformulated memories" and bringing "unspoken hopes" back to life. Notice that she doesn't keep these feelings to herself; she discusses the films and the feelings they invite with friends! She often finds that her "opinion is quite unlike theirs, but the film has certainly touched them or me or all of us in some intimate, entirely personal area."

Two texts that Beauvoir wrote explicitly about film should be noted here as well. In 1959, she wrote "Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome," and in 1985, Beauvoir wrote the preface to Claude Lanzmann's textual version of *Shoah*. In these essays, she acknowledges that dominant images can be received in more than one way. Though she calls American film directors "Hollywood dream merchants" ([1959] 2015, 116), she also brings attention to the multifaceted sensual and sonorous fields in which cinematic images circulate, and the multiple ways viewers might respond. In the Bardot essay, for example, Beauvoir explicitly acknowledges that cinema can be a force that *interrupts* myth, that undoes the "pretty picture." Even though Bardot (meaning the Bardot myth, the "imaginary creature," not the real person or her characters) is a new iteration of woman as erotic object, Beauvoir says of Roger Vadim's *Et Dieu . . . créa la femme* (*And God Created Woman*; 1956), for example, that at the film's end when Bardot's character is ordered by her

husband to return home, “spectators might not believe in the victory of the man and of the social order” ([1959] 2015, 117). The normative picture is a new mythic female creature exemplified by Bardot’s “perfect innocence”: her tomboy, child-woman demeanor; sincerity; love of animals; and instinctive charm. But when we see Bardot’s body moving onscreen, we see her active *desire*, undermining the narcotic effects of the “pretty picture” and becoming disruptive. Beauvoir says Bardot’s “body rarely settles into a state of immobility: she walks, she dances, she moves about. . . . [H]er eroticism is not magical but aggressive. . . . [T]he male is an object to her, just as she is to him” (119).

In the very last essay Beauvoir wrote prior to her death in 1986, she introduced the monumental film of her dear friend and former lover, Claude Lanzmann. *Shoah* (1985), a documentary about the Holocaust that does not utilize a single reel of archival footage, is nine hours and twenty-six minutes of interviews with survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators. Beauvoir says of *Shoah* that “the greatness of Claude Lanzmann’s art is in making places speak, in reviving them through voices and, over and above words, conveying the unspeakable through peoples’ expressions” (1985, iii). Beauvoir’s view of what a film like *Shoah* can do may have been influenced by Lanzmann’s explicit staging of “remembering” in the film as he returns to sites of destruction to trigger memories and revisit the past anew. In the act of returning to a scene to see what we might have missed, we are witness not only to the “camouflage,” like “young forests and fresh grass” (Beauvoir’s “pretty pictures”), that hides “horrible realities,” but *in that experience* we (viewers) are *moved to experience for ourselves* what happened there, in our “minds, hearts, and flesh” (1985, iii).³¹

(in) the Cinema of Experience

In her *Shoah* essay, Beauvoir seems to say that film can give us access to experiences and memories otherwise unavailable. Note that in volume 1 of *The Second Sex* and elsewhere, Beauvoir debunks the false, mythic weaving of narratives, stories, fairytales, and fables about “Woman” on offer in male theology, science, history, psychoanalysis, fiction, and film. In its place, she does not offer something authentically personal or essentially definitive of women. Instead, it is readers who *discover* or, in some cases, recover, experiences by reading about experiences of others. As in the passage on *Shoah*, moved by Lanzmann’s filmmaking, the viewers of the film are “moved to experience” in “minds, hearts, and flesh.” This is the work of film feeling,

an artistically created magic that can give shape to experiences otherwise unspoken, unnamed, buried, or not even our own.

Beauvoir's quest to discover and share women's experiences proceeds in volume 2 in a distinctly cinematic style.³² Calling the style of Marx and Engels "dialectical" and "materialist," radical second-wave feminist Shulamith Firestone insightfully notices that because Marx and Engels perceived history as a "movie rather than a snapshot," they did not fall into the "stagnant 'metaphysical' view that had trapped so many other great minds" ([1970] 2015, 4). In other words, Firestone says, they saw the world as process. Likewise, Beauvoir says "becoming a Woman" is a process, a process that might move differently or elsewhere were women alert to their own experiences and feelings in conversation with the experiences and feelings of others. As my students read Beauvoir's accounts of becoming, how these accounts are staged in her text, and how these accounts make them feel, I ask them to particularly notice Beauvoir's attention to detail, movement, point of view, pace, duration, repetition, sound, and so on.

Feminist historian Judith Coffin characterizes the effects of Beauvoir's method as it reverberates with readers in an "exceptionally interesting author-reader intimacy . . . made intimate by the subjects discussed and the dense exchange of ideas, feelings, fantasies, and experiences" (2020, 2). Because our senses are indivisible from patriarchy's ordering of them, getting a "taste" of the lives of others helps us feel reverberations, make comparisons, and build an alternative common sense. An individual's experience is often disjointed or jarring, and it is always, by definition, partial: as Beauvoir puts it, we each experience life as a "detotalized totality" ([1965] 2011, 198). In other words, the world appears whole to us, but it is always partial, only a tiny slice of the total, always changing and constantly in motion.³³ Singular experiences are always oriented in relationship to the structural architectures that shape the bodies and partition the sensible (and not just the visual) for all of us. Her method favors a focus on movement within moments, the open question of historical interpretation, a sense of undetermined becoming that looks more like tendencies, and attention to noncausal and contingent material conditions and opportunities that shape change.³⁴

The women and girls speaking from within *The Second Sex* (characters in novels, Beauvoir's friends, passages lifted from memoirs and films) articulate inchoate and multiply different desires for *something else* than what patriarchy offers. What woman-identified subjects have in common is the everyday and multiple ways their freedom is constricted, redirected (into romance, religion, motherhood, for example), or blocked.³⁵ Engaging in

comparison and discussion about these experiences opens us to the often-opaque worlds we inhabit, and it can help us imagine other ways to live. Complaints articulated within *The Second Sex*, often, however, frustrate my students. Why are women so whiny? Why don't they complain *more*? Why don't they do something—leave, revolt, refuse?³⁶ Are we them? They and we are invited by Beauvoir to compare their and our experiences to those Beauvoir presents, many of which seem outdated, politically incorrect, too embarrassing to say out loud.³⁷ They are almost unspeakable. But Beauvoir boldly and vividly brings them to life. She describes and appeals to sense experience (taste, touch, smell, sight) to create space for a variety of uncomfortable feelings of identification and disidentification that are evoked in readers. Experiences and senses that had been falsely individualized, considered too private, or rendered unbelievable or unreal in conditions of racialized patriarchy are suddenly available for comparison and conversation.

Beauvoir's archive of experience is an *explicit* appeal to readers, as it asks, "Is this your experience too, or is yours different?" "What do these examples, and the recounting of these experiences, provoke in you?" "How do they make you feel?"³⁸ Keenly attentive to detail, Beauvoir gathers these details of women's experiences, refusing to leash them to a grand theory. Not everything adds up for her, and it is precisely for *this* reason that her work opens up so many worlds and invites us in. Her existential phenomenological method alerts us to the doubled aspect of all experience: we each experience it singularly, but it opens us to a shared world for critique and reimagining. Mining literature and film for details, she lauds their formal and narrative strategies as the "only form of communication capable of giving me the incommunicable—capable of giving me the taste of another life" ([1965] 2011, 201). Film scholar Kelli Fuery remarks on Beauvoir's use of the detail, quoting from Beauvoir's *Force of Circumstance*: "the practice of well-made plots irritated her because of their artificiality; in her novels she wanted 'to imitate the disorder, the indecision, the contingency of life; I had let my characters and the events in the book sprawl in every direction; I left out all the "necessary scenes"; all the important things happened offstage'" (2022, 220). By "necessary" and "important," she means what is usually considered "major." Like Akerman, Beauvoir attends to what seems (but isn't) minor—small, silent, seemingly incommunicable, or invisible (like Jeanne's housework).

Beauvoir trusts her audience. She says that "a director who wishes to set up a real communication with the audience," "like a good writer . . . will make an appeal to their freedom" ([1972] 1993, 177; see also Marso 2017).

Identifying Akerman as a director who also trusts her audience in these ways, I enlist Beauvoir's view of the reader/text relationship to help me think more about what a cinema of experience can do.³⁹ Comparing the viewer/screen relationship to that between reader and text is even more relevant today than when Beauvoir reflected on the differences between text and film. Now, personally controlled screens allow us to return repeatedly to a particular scene or image rather than see it quickly pass by.⁴⁰

Beauvoir invites her readers to *experience women's experiences* as an appeal to feeling. The focus on detail triggers reader and viewer feelings precisely because of the way it acknowledges previously uninterrogated, unnoticed, or deliberately ignored or unbelievably experience.⁴¹ Much like volume 2 of *The Second Sex*, Akerman's primary focus is also on the extraordinary but ordinary details of the everyday lives of women. With Akerman, I build on Beauvoir's writings for my cinema of experience because of her interest in and analysis of cinematic style; because she centers the experiences of girls and women both in becoming and defying the norms of "Woman" and draws on experience to do so; and because her writing in *The Second Sex* is itself cinematic in its attention to the singular detail and to life as always in motion. Akerman's films, and her broader cinematic lexicon, sometimes serve as intensified or vivified cinematic examples of Beauvoir's method. But I also carefully attend to differences between Beauvoir's and Akerman's depictions of women's experiences and the significance of these differences. Akerman's style is distinct from Beauvoir's in part because of the singular way she evokes a mood and makes what was ordinary or invisible pop out to us.⁴² Akerman famously denigrated cinematic or reading experiences that pass by without the reader's or viewer's hyperawareness of the constructedness of the reading and viewing experience. Akerman reported that she did not want her audience to get lost in the film, to be completely caught up in it, or be so entertained that they forget the time. It is important to her that her viewers *feel time passing*: "You feel the time and space. Usually in a movie, you forget time and space. But that's not my thing."⁴³

Reminded by Beauvoir and Mulvey, I emphasize again how politically dangerous it can be to get lost in the aesthetic object, especially when you are *positioned as the object*. But I am attracted to this danger and embrace it in this book! In recent work, Mulvey has revised her claim that female viewers passively absorb dominant images that position them as sexual objects. The male gaze and the cinematic apparatus that delivers it seem less predictable, at least less effective and all-encompassing, when we are attentive to the active minds and bodies that encounter cultural objects. As early

as 1992, bell hooks had shifted the conversation within feminist film circles with “The Oppositional Gaze.” She insisted that Black female viewers were never passive receptacles of white supremacy and patriarchal power. Black women, hooks notes, always utilized the power of the gaze to “sneak a peek, to stare dangerously,” and that, “even in the worst conditions of domination,” the “ability to manipulate one’s gaze” “opens up the possibility of agency” (116).⁴⁴ What hooks doesn’t explicitly say, though her work elsewhere supports this view, is that the gaze is simultaneously embodied, somatic, social, and political. Though embedded in fleshed individual beings, and constructed within and emerging from social and political structures of feeling, the oppositional gaze operates best when supported within communities of feeling where experiences are shared, compared, and considered anew as we are held in a cinematic space for feeling like feminists. My argument is that the liberatory potential of feminist cinema is not only in what images show, what they hide, or which perspective(s) the gaze reflects or how we can oppose it.⁴⁵ My book aims to show that what is important for feeling like a feminist is the discomfiting and dangerous feelings that cinema can invite us to experience and, in particular, that these feelings connect us to others.

Chapter Preview

Contemporary feminist film theorists remain engaged in debates about the male, white, colonial gaze by theorizing how films disperse, shift, or pluralize this gaze in many ways—for instance, utilizing form, sound, image, and theme and inviting both cerebral and embodied reactions to film—and by offering formal readings of films as aesthetic objects, regardless of viewer response. These kinds of film analyses, whether it is their intention to do so or not, add to our collective understanding of how gendered and raced ideals are replicated in media, but also might be weakened via cinematic (aesthetic, technological, formal, narrative) interventions, by viewer responses, and by feminist film analysis. As I have described in this introduction, I add my voice to this literature by exploring how feminist filmmakers use cinematic techniques and formal and narrative strategies to invite viewers to experience women’s experiences as an appeal to feeling. My way of theorizing feeling does not assume knowledge (or predict) that any particular viewer will feel any particular way. I am sensitive to the situatedness of lives and notice that oppressive conditions yield a plurality of experiences and feelings in response to them. Feeling is both personal and political, is always mediated, encompasses multiple kinds of acknowledgment and disavowal,

and spurs all kinds of dangerous and destructive pathologies and passions. Feeling is a dangerous platform on which to try to build feminist community. Yet I forge ahead.

I claim in this book that there is often a gap between the feelings woman-identified subjects think we are supposed to have and those we may *actually* have. I find freedom and movement in these feeling gaps that create spaces where we are held. What most interests me is that the depiction and intensification of the experiences of woman-identified subjects in film may resonate or generate productive dissonance with the experiences of viewers. By focusing on disjunctive and disorienting feelings, I attend to the immediacy, unpredictability, and individuality of affect—as viewers, we might experience boredom, alienation, fear, horror, joy, anxiety, hope, cringe, laughter—at the same time noting that expected feelings are collectively created. Feminized subjects are taught to desire romance, for example, or to think that mothering is instinctive or natural. Individual feelings we experience in response to a film may or may not be expected, but feelings in response to the cinema of experience that I feature in this book are often surprising, disorienting, and uncomfortable, and can and should be shared and compared with what others are feeling. These different modes of feeling—created expectations, affective impact or individual response to cinematic depiction of experience, and sharing these feelings with others—may be in sync or not, may occur or not. I make the case that the cinematic depiction of experience and the subsequent solicitation of uncomfortable feeling in viewers—held, shared, compared—is feminist film’s most transgressive political intervention.

Beauvoir and Akerman are my touchstones here, as I notice how they differently contribute to my thinking on how a cinema of experience produces effects and affects by depicting, inviting, and holding uncomfortable feelings. Beauvoir theorizes how a readership and viewership may respond and take up the recounting of the experiences of girls and women, while Akerman orients my thinking to how alienating or distancing cinematic techniques may enhance not only the depiction of experience but also audience response to it. For Akerman, the invitation of viewer feeling is most intense when neither interiority nor subjectivity is depicted onscreen. I also note that each thinker, in their own way, is occasionally a recalcitrant subject for my project. For example, although Akerman dismissed “feminist,” “lesbian,” or “queer” as descriptors of her films, I build on her rejection of these labels by asking throughout this book what we mean when categorizing a film as “feminist.” And although I am drawn to the way Beauvoir features

and explores the experiences of women and girls, she is, at the same time, insufficiently attentive to differences in the lives of women, especially across racial difference and in (post)colonial settings. For some readers, this may disqualify Beauvoir as a “good” feminist thinker.⁴⁶ But where Beauvoir fails, I seize an opportunity to deploy her concepts to exceed the limits within which she wrote. One example of this is evident in chapter 4, where I focus on Beauvoir’s reading of Brigitte Bardot in Vadim’s *And God Created Woman*.

Focusing on how feminist directors utilize cinematic technique, form, and theme to invite discomfiting feelings and create what I name as holding spaces in their films, my chapters pair what I identify as feminist innovations in technique or form with particular feelings: camerawork with ambivalence; sound with stasis; expansion of genre with horror; montage and circulation with cringe; and color and camp with plasticity. I treat the films and television in my cinema of experience as distinct aesthetic objects deserving sustained attention, as *more than* merely examples to illustrate my theoretical claims. With these commitments in mind, each of my chapters includes (what can be read as) stand-alone interpretations of the films and television, bookended by and situated alongside a broader account of the political-affective effects of feminist cinematic style.

Chapter 1, “Motherwork Camerawork: Ambivalence,” reads three of Akerman’s films “about” mothers that span forty years and include her most celebrated film and her final film. Putting *Jeanne Dielman, From the Other Side*, and *No Home Movie* together, I argue that Akerman’s camera performs an aesthetic form of motherwork by creating spaces where viewers are invited to encounter, hold, and work through feelings, memories, and fantasies about mothers, their work, and their roles. This chapter also links Akerman to Roland Barthes, as Akerman with *No Home Movie* and Barthes with *Camera Lucida* create works that seek to bring their mothers back to them, or for us, to remember and to grieve. Barthes explicitly compares mothers to cameras as he searches for a photo of his mother that will evoke a feeling of her presence. Barthes, Beauvoir, Akerman, and thinkers in the Black radical feminist tradition are put into conversation here about camerawork, motherwork, and Saidiya Hartman’s “fabulation,” a process of refusal enacted by telling stories about people, events, and desires that official archives previously ignored or erased. The final film I bring into this chapter is the French-Senegalese director Alice Diop’s *Saint Omer* (2022), which also poignantly invites the ambivalence viewers feel about mothers with her stylistically and thematically challenging depiction of an inscrutable Black mother on trial for killing her child.

Chapter 2, “White Noise: Stasis,” begins with Beauvoir’s deft description of patriarchy as a male sensorium—a regime of vision, smell, touch, taste, and sound. This chapter focuses specifically on sound as I begin by showing that Akerman’s use of discordant and disjointed sound and silence invites feelings of stuckness, of moving in repetitive loops. Attention to Akerman’s innovative use of sound, I argue, can trigger viewer awareness that the white noise of patriarchy might be sleepwalking us through our lives. The chapter’s examples, Akerman’s *Blow Up My Town*, Emerald Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman* (2020), and Michaela Coel’s *I May Destroy You* (2020), show how feminist media can help us notice how “women” are made, and trauma is triggered, by the white noise of patriarchy. Ultimately, I show that feminist media can reorient the ears of their audiences to hear like feminists by inviting us to feel, hold, acknowledge, and address the traumas of everyday sexism and worse buried in our psyches.

Chapter 3, “Genre Trouble: Horror,” reads three prize-winning arthouse feminist films that I see as adapting key aspects of Akerman’s style in the service of gender and genre-bending body horror. Mati Diop’s *Atlantique* (*Atlantics*; 2019), Audrey Diwan’s *L’Événement* (*Happening*; 2021), and Julia Ducournau’s *Titane* (2021) each experiment with horror genre tricks to show horror defined not by jump scares, gore, shock, or survival of the final girl, but as women’s everyday experience in our postcolonial, late capitalist, technology- and surveillance-oriented, still patriarchal and sexist world. I choose these three films not only because they experiment with a genre that is known to traffic in misogynist narratives and messages, but because, like their misogynist predecessors, they use cinematic techniques to double down on attention to bodies and feelings. The specific ways these European arthouse films deploy horror genre tricks—hyperrealism, exaggeration, excess, fabulation, or fantasy—capture *better* the feelings and experiences of women under patriarchy than documentaries or what we might consider more “realist” filmmaking. In these films, women’s “real” experiences constitute the horror in the genre and are an example of what I name feminist realism.

Chapter 4, “Epistolary Archive: Cringe,” features iterations of feminist cringe comedy that I read as love letters to viewers and love letters to a genealogy of feminist creativity. Cringe comedies are another example of (what I call in chapter 3) feminism’s visual realisms, so named for doing the feminist political work of bringing women’s (horrific, shameful, unnamed) experiences to our senses to focus our conscious attention on them. I read Catherine Breillat’s *Romance* (1999) as setting the stage for Joey Soloway’s

2016–17 television adaptation of Chris Kraus’s book *I Love Dick* (1997), as they each utilize confessional direct address as voice-over or through the circulation of letters. This address to the audience invites subversive affective responses—laughter and cringe. These bodily responses interrupt and humiliate the fantasies of the male gaze, making space to acknowledge the excessive, complicated, and seemingly shameful realities of women’s desire. I theorize cringe as an individual bodily gesture that exposes political feelings about collective experience in the intimate spheres of sex, love, and romance. Evidenced by bodily gesture and feelings of cringe, shared laughter and exuberance can bring women’s desires into view.

In a short coda (in pink), I read Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie*. The explosion of strong feelings in the critical and audience response to *Barbie* is a plastic perfect way to extend my ideas about what feelings can and cannot do, this time not via avant-garde, foreign, or independent film and television, but via a summer blockbuster. *Barbie* was accused of being both too “woke” and too “pink,” received intense attention from antifeminists and feminists alike, and earned millions in ticket sales by drawing women and girls to the movies donning Barbie pink clothes and accessories. My reading of *Barbie* positions Gerwig’s film in a cinema of experience by showing how it builds on the aesthetic and themes of Akerman’s *Window Shopping* and *Jeanne Dielman*. I notice the use of color, artificiality, and the theme of control and lack thereof to argue that *Barbie* invites viewer experiences with gender and aesthetic plasticity in uncomfortable and transformative ways. Maybe most important, *Barbie* invites feelings that help us see ourselves as part of a collective. Feeling linked to other feminized persons can feel uncomfortable and out of our control, particularly when we are positioned in damaging hierarchies and connected through violent structures and institutions. *Barbie* not only envisions parallel worlds existing alongside our own, but also invites us to feel Barbie feeling her way with other women out of these worlds and into something entirely new.

My postscript is called “Invitation(s).” Offering my final thoughts, feelings, and hopes for this book, I revisit the invitation to feeling that a cinema of experience evokes. I locate this invitation as a feminist address in several senses, as I direct attention to the ongoing issuance of invitation(s) to readers and viewers that a cinema of experience makes possible.

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FEELING LIKE A FEMINIST

Notes

Introduction: Feeling Like a Feminist

Epigraph source: Definitions are my own, in some cases adapted from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

I thank Marie-Anne Lescourret, who served as translator and editor for an earlier portion of this introduction published in the essay “Simone de Beauvoir et la rencontre cinématographique,” *Cités* 90 (2022): 131–44.

- 1 Feminist and cultural theorist Sara Ahmed (2010) names these disturbances as feeling like an “affect alien.” She says the feminist is blamed for killing the joy of others (as they celebrate family, children, heterosexual romance, and the like), hence her affirmation of the figure of the “feminist killjoy.”
- 2 Marking the dedication in her 1970 book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, “for Simone de Beauvoir, who endured,” Shulamith Firestone puts this quite vividly when she says, “The first women are fleeing the massacre, and, shaking and tottering, are beginning to find each other. Their first move is careful joint observation, to resensitize a fractured consciousness. This is painful: no matter how many levels of consciousness one reaches, the problem always goes deeper. It is everywhere” ([1970] 2015, 3).
- 3 Audre Lorde speaks powerfully about how difficult it is to acknowledge differences between people (“we have all been programmed to respond

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to human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate”) ([1984] 2007, 115). More significant for this context, she also speaks powerfully about how these differences and the way we respond to them have crippled feminism when it becomes apparent that differences between women are relational (and hierarchical): “I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, ‘Tell me how you feel but don’t say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.’ But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?” (125).

- 4 See my entry “Feminism” (Marso 2015) in *Encyclopedia of Political Thought*.
- 5 I struggle a bit here to assign a name to the subjects and viewers who interest me. I say “woman-identified” while also acknowledging that to identify with women may require at least a protofeminist consciousness, a discomfort with cultural norms, or an awareness of the threat of losing bodily autonomy. Complicating things further, were I to say that I am interested in feminist-identified subjects and viewers, I could dispense with “woman-identified,” but feminist-identified subjects and viewers assumes an even stronger political commitment. To be feminist-identified, one must be already in solidarity with woman-identified and feminized persons.
- 6 See my essay (Marso 2010) and other essays in *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 1.
- 7 Feeling often gets conflated with affect, but when distinguished, the latter is categorized as involuntary, preconscious, outside of language. Both affect and feeling are embodied, and I insist that both are also social and political. Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feelings* (2003) and Victoria Hesford’s *Feeling Women’s Liberation* (2013) each deal with feelings in the way I am theorizing here, although they focus their attention on different sites. Cvetkovich explores everyday trauma to develop a queer approach that reads oral histories from lesbian activists, writers, and scholars. Hesford focuses on rhetorical strategies of the second wave, by feminists and in the media to argue that the “feminist-as-lesbian” was a persistent “image-memory” of women’s liberation. Hesford says this memory has obscured the complexity of the movement, which she discovers by exploring feelings about feminism in films and media texts.
- 8 In *Feminism in Coalition: Thinking with US Women of Color Feminism* (2022), Liza Taylor shows how very difficult it can be to form feminist coalitions, but argues that Women of Color feminist thought can lead the way. Women of Color feminism is, for Taylor, a theoretical and po-

litical orientation, rather than a race or class designation, although she says it is also important to notice the latter.

- 9 Feelings of collective joy and shared laughter are explored in my readings of Joey Soloway's *I Love Dick* (2016–17) and Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023). See chapter 4 and the coda.
- 10 Some have suggested to me that *Legally Blonde* might be positioned as a precursor to *Barbie*. Playing Barbie, Margot Robbie is also often dressed in pink from head to toe, and in the summer the film was released, fans wore pink to the cinema, snapped selfies, and posted them on social media. In the coda, I suggest that a more appropriate precursor to *Barbie* is Chantal Akerman's *Window Shopping* (1986). Staging what Gerwig calls an "authentic artificiality" (Vicino 2023), *Barbie*, like *Window Shopping*, uses color, music, and humor, but still invites uncomfortable feelings for viewers and critics.
- 11 In *Uncomfortable Television* (2023), Hunter Hargraves uses the modifiers "uncomfortable" and "discomforting" to describe television of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Arguing that "television thus began to normalize discomfort during this time as a strategy of governmentality" (1), he notices that television started to employ discomforting affects at the very moment that neoliberal structures of governance were beginning to dominate in the economic sphere. Hargraves observes that "audiences learned to transform feelings of discomfort to feelings of pleasure," thus attuning capitalist subjects to the discomforting structures of economic precarity characterizing late capitalism (1). I am attracted to the way Hargraves links innovations in television to economic changes in the capitalist economy. Asking what feminist film can do to resist capitalism and patriarchy was a key question for feminist filmmakers and thinkers beginning in the 1970s. Noting that film is most often an ideological apparatus for patriarchy and capitalism sparked conversation about whether and how feminist film might be or become an art form that resists the dominant forces that Hargraves charts in his book. But Hargraves's "uncomfortable television" is not a force for resistance. He characterizes it as exemplified by "unlikeable protagonists, widespread profanity, depictions of graphic violence and explicit sex, and the exploitation of cultural minorities" (2). In my work, I pay less attention to theme, narrative, and character (although these can be important) and more to formal innovations such as "motherwork camerawork," breaking of narrative, jarring use of sound, innovation with genre, and so on to find that stylistic discomfort can be subversive. Akerman's way of creating holding spaces in her films and Beauvoir's attention to the lived existence of woman-identified subjects both, I contend, show us ways to think and act otherwise, and do not turn discomfort with patriarchy

and capitalism into pleasure, *even though*, as Beauvoir always reminds us, there are distinct and specific forms of pleasure (affective and material) to be gained for women who conform to patriarchal norms.

- 12 Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects* (2014) shows how affects are invited by innovations in form and produced through formal mechanisms. Her interest in affect shows an interest in bodies and feelings and does not explicitly reject phenomenology as a method for reading film, although it is not her method. In Brinkema's later book, *Life-Destroying Diagrams* (2022), however, she explicitly rejects phenomenological interest in embodiment of any sort and is exclusively concerned with the formal features of film. In a recent interview, she says, "Of course I have wept at movies, I have shuddered, and have had embodied reactions; I just don't think these reactions are that interesting. I don't actually think they're speculatively generative; I would be intellectually mortified to produce a kind of diaristic account because I just can't imagine that anyone else would be that interested in what my body does. And I think it's a very strange thing to keep calling certain intellectual positions to account for producing such a record." See also Anger and Jirsa (2019). I engage Brinkema's work in chapters 3 and 4 on the sources of affective impacts of feminist horror and on what counts as cinematic and ontological evidence of women's desire.

- 13 It is important to notice that Beauvoir's phenomenological method begins not from a "universal" body or consciousness, but from the embodied position of the "other." Turning to Beauvoir to ground my own phenomenological thinking about film supports my position that bodies should not be theorized as universal nor general but always situated. Bodies are always situated through and in relationship to dominant aesthetic and political conceptions of the (white, male, able) body's limits, look, and capacities. In an important critique of the limits of phenomenology *tout court*, Rizvana Bradley argues that phenomenology is unable to "think the black aesthesis which emerges in the *absence* of a body." She writes that "black people have never *had* (which is to say, never had the capacity *to lay claim to*) bodies in the sense presumed by phenomenology" (2021, 37). For Bradley, this is an aesthetic problem, in addition to being a philosophical and political problem, precisely because "it is by means of aesthetic fabrication that [freedom] is sustained as an idea, as an attachment, as a right to be defended" (20).

- 14 I reacted with joy when I read this news, even though I understand how unfair and arbitrary (at best) and soul-killing, oppressive, and destructive acts of canon formation and rankings of these sorts can be. For the most vivid articulation of the problems of lists, see "Against Lists," by film theorist Elena Gorfinkel (2019). In that essay, she states, "Claiming

aesthetic supremacy begins with the list. Would that we had other ways to create spheres of value altogether, and along with them the capricious and impoverished arbitration of what counts as cinematic art, art worth watching and worth fighting for. The list consolidates as if self-evidence, reasserting in all that it doesn't list, all that its lister failed to learn, to see, to know. Lists are for laundry, not for film. If we wash out our eyes and ears and minds, we will find that what clings to us, after the suds clear, are the tendrils of another cinematic world, of images, spaces, voices, passages, struggles, and time: time recovered from its theft by narcissistic cinephilia's allegiance with capital."

- 15 Following the release of *Je tu il elle* (1975), Akerman is quoted as saying, "Each time I was asked to present my film in a gay festival, I would say no. I don't want to take part in gay or women's festivals. I don't want to take part in Jewish festivals. I just want to take part in regular festivals." See Cardamenis (2016), in an article announcing a major retrospective of Akerman's films at the Brooklyn Academy of Music following her 2015 death. Cardamenis writes that Akerman's films exceed any category and that *Jeanne Dielman* cannot represent them all. The article contains a great summary of Akerman's major films and concludes this way: "What Chantal Akerman deserves—what any director of a high caliber deserves—is not to be reduced to the films that exemplify a particular tendency, but to receive equal or greater consideration for the works that diverge from, complicate or even reject her most identifiable characteristics. Akerman's films reveal a belief that looking, really *looking*, at something in its entirety—rare is the close-up or insert in a Chantal Akerman film—is a springboard for recognition and understanding. The least we can do is open our eyes to her work as widely as she opened hers to the world."
- 16 See Fuery (2020). Kelli Fuery defines "empty time" in film as a form of traumatic duration for viewers. This is a "formal aesthetic specific to potential audience emotional experience to time" (209), wherein slow tracking or panning shots, static moments, or lengthier shots create an "in-between time for both the character and the audience" (210).
- 17 Catherine Fowler (2021) discusses how unfamiliar Delphine Seyrig was with these kinds of tasks, and as a participant in feminist movements, she did not identify with a housewife's work. Yet Seyrig felt "an empathy for Jeanne and the urgency for the protagonist's depiction on screen" (44). Seyrig, Fowler notes, had to be coached through all these tasks. In a television interview she admitted to never having made coffee from scratch. Fowler says, "The lengthy scene on day two in which Jeanne grinds the beans, boils the water and then filters the coffee grounds carefully, so as to refresh her spoilt morning cup, would have required much instruction

and rehearsal for Seyrig" (44). One brilliant example of Seyrig's radical feminism is evident in an essay from 2022 by Ros Murray in *Another Screen*. Writing about Seyrig's collective feminist media work, Murray says the following:

An extraordinary example of video's capacity to disrupt and reinvent the hegemonic, bland, and watered-down politics of feminism as it was shown on television screens in 1975, *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* concludes by displaying the informal signatures of four women ("Carole," "Delphine," "Ioana," and "Nadja") intent on proving that only video provides the emancipatory tools their politics require. In this video, Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig, Ioana Wieder, and Nadja Ringart, collectively known as *Les Muses s'amuse* ("Muses amuse themselves"), take up their proverbial scalpels, using editing as a political tool to cut up men. They edit and rework an existing television program from the same year, inserting images, comments and exasperated interjections. As Seyrig argued, "everyone dreams of responding to the television": this is what they did.

- 18 Ivone Margulies wrote the first important, brilliant book on Akerman's films and her distinctive style in *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (1996). I hope my own book will add to a growing body of Akerman scholarship. The work of Marion Schmid, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, Carol Mavor, Griselda Pollock, Janet Bergstrom, Juliana Bruno, Cyril Béghin, Gwendolyn Foster, Caroline Fowler, Alice Blackhurst, Kate Rennebohm, Joanna Hogg, and Adam Roberts, among several others, has taught me so much, including how to be a sensitive and thinking/feeling viewer of Akerman's films and installations. In addition, many special journal issues and journal articles on Akerman are consulted and cited within my chapters and are listed in the references. I have also enjoyed listening to and learning from Kate Rennebohm and Simon Howell's excellent podcast *The Akerman Year* (2021–23), where they and several guests discuss Akerman's films. I have also found Ara Osterweil's discussion of fleshy bodies in films that otherwise seem cold and distant very relevant for thinking about Akerman's cinema, even though she does not discuss Akerman's films. See Osterweil (2014).
- 19 Akerman seems to disavow the quest to "know" by making her characters unknowable. Kate Rennebohm (2021) characterizes this as an exploration of skepticism in Akerman's work. In a chapter discussing Akerman's *La captive* (*The Captive*; 2000) in conversation with the philosophy of Stanley Cavell, and in particular his emphasis on skepticism, Rennebohm notices that "[Akerman's] formal depictions of bodies as impassable sites, housing interiorities that can neither be dismissed nor accessed; her narrative depictions of characters struggling to overcome

isolation or their own inexplicabilities; and her regular confrontation of spectators with extended, frontal close-up shots of opaque characters, through which she challenges those spectators to accept or abandon these figures in their unknowability, all speak to her investigations into and expressions of this philosophical problematic [skepticism]" (255). My own reading of *La captive* emphasizes Simon's desire to know and possess Ariane, a trait he shares with Almayer's wanting to control his daughter in Akerman's 2011 *La folie Almayer*, an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novel *Almayer's Folly* (1895). I conclude in a short *Los Angeles Review of Books* essay on *La captive* (2024b) that, "in Akerman's films, we witness the pathologies of colonial, patriarchal, and racialized ways of knowing as possession, the forms of captivity they create and reproduce, and how we can do more to transform these with others than we can do alone. Most important, though, and important not to miss, is that her films feature women inhabiting forms and scripts (motherhood, art, music, love, sex, friendship, colonialism, captivity) in new ways."

- 20 In an essay called "Phenomenology in the Kitchen" (2024c), I read *Jeanne Dielman* with Audrey Diwan's *Happening* (2021) and Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983) to explore feeling time like a feminist in these three iconic feminist films.
- 21 I think here of Akerman's insistence (2004) that she wanted viewers to "feel time passing" as they watch her films: "You know, when most people go to the movies, the ultimate compliment—for them—is to say, 'We didn't notice the time pass!' With me, you see the time pass. And feel it pass. You also sense that this is the time that leads toward death. There's some of that, I think. And that's why there's so much resistance. I took two hours of someone's life."
- 22 I return to why and how the detail matters in chapter 1, as I read three of Akerman's films with Roland Barthes's focus on the *punctum*. In a recent book, *Deconstruction, Feminism, Film* (2018), film theorist Sarah Dillon engages the work of Jacques Derrida on the detail to mine his work for a method for reading feminist film. Dillon says close attention to detail is what Derrida calls "metonymic reading" (138). Derrida recommends this particular kind of reading when confronted with a text (visual, written, or otherwise) that does not conform to the logic of narrative to which we are accustomed. The way to do a metonymic reading, according to this explanation, is to focus on the seemingly inconsequential detail in a slow and in-depth way while also moving with "sustained speed across the text" (139). The relationship between the part and the whole, between slow attention and quick understanding, is complex and vexed. How can we resist conjuring the "whole" when putting all the details together? Or, as Derrida would say, how can we avoid spectral logic that compels

that the specter will remain even in the magnification of the detail? I reviewed Dillon's book in Marso (2021).

- 23 Hunt-Ehrlich spoke at a session of "Combahee Experimental: Black Women's Experimental Filmmaking," a series curated by Tina Campt and Simone Leigh at Princeton University. On October 22, 2020, she and Nuotama Bodomo were the guest interlocutors. See Bodomo et al. 2020.
- 24 I am not aware of any work to date that situates Akerman's films in explicit conversations about the pedagogical political work of film, nor do I know of work on Akerman that is in conversation with feminist political thought. As a political theorist, I am always in conversation with the literatures of political and feminist theory, and in this book especially, I engage with the work of Lauren Berlant on intimacy and comedy; Saidiya Hartman on fabulation; Bonnie Honig on refusal and feminist criticism; Christina Sharpe and Shawn Michelle Smith on Barthes and the *punctum*; Patricia Hill Collins on Black feminist thought and mothers; Jacqueline Rose on mothers and motherwork; Tina Campt on acoustics in photography; Cressida Heyes on experience at the edge; and Audre Lorde, Victoria Hesford, Sara Ahmed, and Ann Cvetkovich on feeling. I also engage the work of film and media scholars such as Laura Mulvey on the male gaze; Jenny Chamarette, Kelli Fuery, and Vivian Sobchack on phenomenology; bell hooks on the oppositional gaze; Maggie Hennefeld on laughter; Kara Keeling on the image of the Black femme; Rosalind Galt on global cinema; Carol Clover, Linda Williams, Joan Hawkins, Adam Lowenstein, and Alison Pierse on horror/gender/genre; Eugenie Brinkema on form/affect/horror; Rizvana Bradley on attunement and "Black aesthesis"; and Michael Gillespie on "cinematic blackness."
- 25 Several recent books bring Beauvoir into the study of cinema, and with this book, I am delighted to be in their company. An edited volume by Jean-Pierre Boulé and Ursula Tidd, *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema* (2012), offers several Beauvoir-inflected film readings. Kate Ince's *The Body and the Screen* (2017) attends to how female subjectivity onscreen exemplifies women's embodiment in writings of Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Christine Battersby. Kelli Fuery's *Ambiguous Cinema: From Simone de Beauvoir to Feminist Film Phenomenology* (2022) highlights the discomfiting feeling of ambiguity that arises from formal and narrative choices in exemplary feminist films. Fuery's engagement with Beauvoir's writings and her use of Beauvoir's phenomenological method to study film is closest to my own. She says, "The emotional turbulence that results from ambiguity holds specific significance for a phenomenology of film experience" (2022, 219).
- 26 I began my entry on *The Second Sex* (Marso 2016b), this way:

Since its publication in 1949, reception of *The Second Sex* has been ambivalent and fraught with emotion. Listen to how Beauvoir describes early response to the book in her 1963 autobiography, *Force of Circumstance*: “Unsatisfied, frigid, priapic, nymphomaniac, lesbian, a hundred times aborted, I was everything, even an unmarried mother. People offered to cure me of my frigidity or to temper my labial appetites; I was promised revelations, in the coarsest terms but in the name of the true, the good and the beautiful, in the name of health and even of poetry, all unworthily trampled underfoot by me.” . . . Beauvoir goes on for several pages documenting violent and aggressive reactions to her book.

In an opposing stance, also emotional and deeply ambivalent, Beauvoir was cast as the “mother” of feminism, a label she disavowed in a 1974 interview remarking that “mother-daughter relations are generally catastrophic” . . . and “people don’t tend to listen to what their mothers are telling them.” . . . Her text has also been called “the feminist bible” even though Beauvoir herself was an atheist. . . . Over half a decade later, the text still solicits powerful reactions. Reviewing the new 2010 translation in the *New York Times*, Francine du Plessix Gray says: “Beauvoir’s truly paranoid hostility toward the institutions of marriage and motherhood—another characteristic of early feminism—is so extreme as to be occasionally hilarious.” She goes on to say that “pessimism runs through the text like a poisonous river” while reassuring us that Beauvoir did not hate men.

- 27 It is especially frustrating for readers, I think, that Beauvoir does not name one source, origin, or cause of patriarchal oppression (that can be fixed or opposed) and instead details how patriarchy creates a sensorium that surrounds and permeates everything and everyone. On this point, Davide Panagia (2024) cites my work in which I characterize Beauvoir’s account of patriarchy as “a complex assemblage of affects keeping us emotionally, psychically, materially, and bodily captive to the falsely created hierarchy of sexual difference” (118, citing Marso 2017, 24). Panagia calls this a “dispositional power” such that “manner, decorum, and style” are able to “shape personhood by disposing bodies and arranging their movements” (117).
- 28 In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir mostly discusses the negative power of images, although as we will see, her view on what cinema’s images can do is a touchstone for me as I theorize how they appeal to the viewer’s freedom. For a fascinating account of what cinematic images, and in particular the “reconciliation image” can do to redress the violence that is inflicted on difference, see Schoolman (2020). Reading with Adorno and Whitman, Schoolman offers an account of aesthetic education via cinematic images.

- 29 As Jane Bennett pointed out to me in conversation, the word is apt, as it names a particularly subtle, insidious, and indirect form of causality. Today Laurence would be Yaya (Charlbi Dean) in Ruben Östlund's film *Triangle of Sadness*, which won the 2022 Palme d'Or at Cannes: a beautiful, partially complicit, woman who sells her face and body, and selfies of her staged activities, to generate profit and goodies. One of these goodies is to travel (and work) on a high-end cruise where she has to reckon with the ugliness of wealth in all its gross excesses and absurd inequalities. In Östlund's story, this world is revealed as made literally of shit and vomit. Beauvoir's story is not quite as obvious (or as hard-hitting, or at all biting) like Östlund's but they share the same critique of our shared world rife with inequality, alienation, and oppression.
- 30 Jonathan Kaplan was here reviewing a film that Akerman made on the "making" of *Golden Eighties* that premiered at the New York Film Festival in 1983. See Kruger (1983).
- 31 Relatedly, Michael Shapiro says Bergman's close-ups signify a collective potential inviting "possible confrontations, expectations, creations" and allowing the viewer to "feel the world differently." See Shapiro (2021, 5).
- 32 In *Politics with Beauvoir* (2017), I utilized Beauvoir's writings as I analyzed several films, but, like scholars who also engage Beauvoir on film, I did not at that time theorize how Beauvoir's writings themselves are cinematic. What I did notice was that Beauvoir solicits the feelings of readers in the second volume of *The Second Sex*. I have since come to understand Beauvoir's solicitation of feeling via cinematic writing and the unique qualities of film as helping to realize the political potential of feminist film as the invitation of discomfiting feelings.
- 33 Another thing to note about volume 2 of *The Second Sex* is that Beauvoir collects a multitude of experiences of young girls, adolescents, and women as they move through life at every stage, titling the chapters *as if* the experiences are collective even though these experiences happen to each woman as her own. The chapter titles are "Childhood," "The Girl," "Sexual Initiation," "The Lesbian," "The Married Woman," "The Mother," "Social Life," "Prostitutes and Hetaeras," "From Maturity to Old Age," "Woman's Situation and Character," "The Narcissist," "The Mystic," "The Woman in Love," and "The Independent Woman."
- 34 Beauvoir also emphasizes that women's individual choices and women's collective ability to effect change within the present and for the future are always situated within and influenced by conditions of oppression and the accumulated weight of the past. Beauvoir shows that the time and timing of women's work is often invisible, undervalued, and repetitive; women's freedom is always at risk of being stolen if/as we move toward

female destinies; and a future for feminism can be fought for and won, but it is never easy, predictable, or certain.

- 35 Women themselves get invested in femininity and take it up by habits and, seemingly, by choice. For an especially compelling and clear examination of why and how women get pleasure from submission across Beauvoir's oeuvre, see Garcia (2021).
- 36 In Sarah Polley's mesmerizing film *Women Talking* (2022), the women of an isolated religious community explore these options, and viewers come to understand how difficult it is to enact any of these strategies, even though several of the women and their female children have been subjected to sexual abuse for years.
- 37 Feminist literary scholar Meryl Altman draws our attention to arguments in Beauvoir's work that seem outdated, wrong, or politically incorrect. Altman digs into Beauvoir's recounting of experiences of bad sex, lesbians, and race and class, which makes students cringe. See Altman (2020) and Marso (2023).
- 38 I am also thinking here of how Fred Moten and Stefano Harvey theorize feeling as moving in community, "a way of feeling through others." What they call "hapticality" is born in the hold of transatlantic slave ships as "a feel for feeling others feeling you." See Moten and Harney (2013, 98). "When Black Shadow sings 'are you feelin' the feelin'?' he is . . . asking about a way of feeling through others, a feel for feeling others feeling you. This is modernity's insurgent feel, its inherited caress, its skin talk, tongue touch, breath speech, hand laugh" (2013, 105). For an excellent overview of Moten's political theory, see Shulman (2020).
- 39 I appreciate the way Angela Davis (1985) talks about art and politics when she says "progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensely social character of their interior lives. Ultimately, it can propel people toward social emancipation." The way I am theorizing the relationship between art and politics, however, does not draw such a straight line of causality.
- 40 I note here that Laura Mulvey moved from worrying about the positioned passivity of female viewers in 1975 to a more complexly and richly evocative theorization of the role of gender and spectatorship as she discusses technical and social changes in film production and ways of viewing. See Mulvey (1975, 2006).
- 41 In case it is not already clear, I emphasize again here that there is no "ground" to these experiences, nor any claim that "the personal is political" means that personal experience is a "correct" picture of the world. To claim a space for "experience," as Beauvoir and Akerman do, and as

I do in this book by collecting an archive of cinema that opens these spaces, is to invite multiple and contradictory interpretations and claims.

- 42 In *Feeling Women's Liberation* (2013), Victoria Hesford keeps her focus on the image of “feminist as lesbian” precisely because of the figure’s ability to remain strange. She says the following:

By reincorporating her [Kate Millet as “feminist as lesbian”] into the ongoing, expansive, and diverse elaboration of a feminist symbolic space, the figure of the feminist-as-lesbian becomes a sign of the possibilities—unrealized as well as realized—of women’s liberation. . . . She becomes a sign, for example, of the movement’s complex challenge to heterosexuality as a sociocultural institution, a sign of that movement’s resistance to the claims of the normal, the mainstream, and the legitimate. . . . She becomes a sign of how, in the early years of the women’s liberation movement, a significant collectivity of women became consciously, actively, and visibly strange in relation to the sociocultural norms of their particular moment. (248)

- 43 Quoted in Smith (1998). Akerman is famous for her “long takes” and slow filmmaking. Mike Shapiro discusses the “‘long take style,’” as the Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky describes it, which “gives the viewer ‘an opportunity to live through what is on screen as if it were his own life, to take over the experience imprinted in time on the screen.’” Shapiro adds that “what also happens with long takes is the viewer’s ability to ‘feel the camera,’ as the Italian film director Pier Paolo Pasolini points out” (2021, 4). Beauvoir singles out Pasolini as a filmmaker who “tr[ies] to communicate their vision of the world to me; and mine is enriched if they succeed in doing so” ([1972] 1993, 180). She says:

This was the case with Pasolini’s *Medea*. He answered a question that had worried me—how was it that some civilizations were able to reconcile a high degree of culture with the barbarous rites of human sacrifice? In *Medea* Pasolini brings forward no new evidence. But by means of a great deal of work and by the choice of astonishing landscapes and of [Maria] Callas—an extraordinary actress in this film—he succeeds in re-creating the world of the Sacred. A superb young man is put to death, cut to pieces and devoured before our eyes: the sight is so gravely beautiful that we are not in the least horrified. As she hurries away towards the sea, Medea cuts off her brother’s head and throws his quivering flesh behind her chariot; yet the act does not take away from the nobility of her face. Later, when she is set down in rationalistic Greece, Medea loses her magical powers: this second part seemed to me much less successful. (180–81)

I note here, too, that Alice Diop features sections of Pasolini's *Medea* in her *Saint Omer*, discussed in chapter 1.

- 44 Challenging the early Mulvey and reading Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and *Illusions* (1982), bell hooks says Black women take pleasure in film by reading images oppositionally. See hooks (1992), 116. We also might think with Stuart Hall in regard to encoding and decoding. Hall identifies three positions for a reader of the encoded-message media texts: agreement, opposition, and negotiation. The "negotiated" position has the advantage of avoiding the binary of either agreeing or opposing, but it is my understanding of bell hooks that she, too, sees a third way within her oppositional gaze. See Hall (1980).
- 45 The challenges to "perfect," or even adequate, representation, aesthetic and political, are many. In *Cinema Pessimism* (2019), Joshua Foa Dienstag explores how and why the representative project is so vexed. See his chapter 5 on the *Up* series for an especially fascinating take on how difficult it is to truly represent individuals who themselves are moving, changing, and may not even understand themselves, even over a long period of time. I share Dienstag's pessimism about representation, but his primary worries are about the individual. My worries about representation acknowledge the impossibility of capturing the diversity of women's lives as we recognize how this "diversity" is itself produced through patriarchal, capitalist, extractive, and racist power configurations.
- 46 Meryl Altman leans into the cringiest responses to Beauvoir's writings from today's perspective in her *Beauvoir in Time* (2020). I reviewed the book for *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, characterizing it this way: "Altman digs into three recurring aspects of Simone de Beauvoir's thought—bad sex, lesbians, and 'race and class'—which have in recent years been considered embarrassingly 'of her era,' and which remain underdiscussed despite the current renaissance of serious scholarship on Beauvoir. . . . We all know these passages: the ones that make our students say 'we (feminists? women? scholars?) wouldn't (shouldn't?) say that now!,' the ones on which critics focus, the ones that can cause Beauvoir scholars to blush, cringe, or get defensive" (Marso 2022d, 177).

Chapter 1. Motherwork Camerawork: Ambivalence

Epigraph source: Definitions are my own, in some cases adapted from the Oxford English Dictionary.

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