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# **“Something Else Besides a Mother”: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama**

by Linda Williams

Oh, God! I'll never forget that last scene, when her daughter is being married inside the big house with the high iron fence around it and she's standing out there—I can't even remember who it was, I saw it when I was still a girl, and I may not even be remembering it right. But I am remembering it—it made a tremendous impression on me—anyway, maybe it was Barbara Stanwyck. She's standing there and it's cold and raining and she's wearing a thin little coat and shivering, and the rain is coming down on her poor head and streaming down her face with the tears, and she stands there watching the lights and hearing the music and then she just drifts away. How they got us to consent to our own eradication! I didn't just feel pity for her; I felt that shock of recognition—you know, when you see what you sense is your own destiny up there on the screen or on the stage. You might say I've spent my whole life trying to arrange a different destiny!<sup>1</sup>

These words of warning, horror, and fascination are spoken by Val, a character who is a mother herself, in Marilyn French's 1977 novel *The Women's Room*. They are especially interesting for their insight into the response of a woman viewer to the image of her “eradication.” The scene in question is from the end of *Stella Dallas*, King Vidor's 1937 remake of the 1925 film by Henry King. The scene depicts the resolution of the film: that moment when the good hearted, ambitious, working class floozy, Stella, sacrifices her only connection to her daughter in order to propel her into an upper-class world of surrogate family unity. Such are the mixed messages—of joy in pain, of pleasure in sacrifice—that typically resolve the melodramatic conflicts of “the woman's film.”

It is not surprising, then, that Marilyn French's mother character, in attempting to resist such a sacrificial model of motherhood, should have so selective a memory of the conflict of emotions that conclude the film. Val only remembers the tears, the cold, the mother's pathetic alienation from her daughter's triumph inside the “big house with the high iron fence,” the abject loneliness of the woman who cannot belong to that place and so “just drifts away.” Val's own history, her own choices, have caused her to forget the perverse triumph of the scene: Stella's lingering for a last look even when a

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policeman urges her to move on; her joy as the bride and groom kiss; the swelling music as Stella does not simply “drift away” but marches triumphantly toward the camera and into a close-up that reveals a fiercely proud and happy mother clenching a handkerchief between her teeth.

It is as if the task of the narrative has been to find a “happy” ending that will exalt an abstract ideal of motherhood even while stripping the actual mother of the human connection on which that ideal is based. Herein lies the “shock of recognition” of which French’s mother-spectator speaks.

The device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of “the woman’s film” in general and the sub-genre of the maternal melodrama in particular.<sup>2</sup> In these films it is quite remarkable how frequently the self-sacrificing mother must make her sacrifice that of the connection to her children—either for her or their own good.

With respect to the mother-daughter aspect of this relation, Simone de Beauvoir noted long ago that because of the patriarchal devaluation of women in general, a mother frequently attempts to use her daughter to compensate for her own supposed inferiority by making “a superior creature out of one whom she regards as her double.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the unparalleled closeness and similarity of mother to daughter sets up a situation of significant mirroring that is most apparent in these films. One effect of this mirroring is that although the mother gains a kind of vicarious superiority by association with a superior daughter, she inevitably begins to feel inadequate to so superior a being and thus, in the end, to feel inferior. Embroiled in a relationship that is so close, mother and daughter nevertheless seem destined to lose one another through this very closeness.

Much recent writing on women’s literature and psychology has focused on the problematic of the mother-daughter relationship as a paradigm of a woman’s ambivalent relationship to herself.<sup>4</sup> In *Of Woman Born* Adrienne Rich writes, “The loss of the daughter to the mother, mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy. We acknowledge Lear (father-daughter split), Hamlet (son and mother), and Oedipus (son and mother) as great embodiments of the human tragedy, but there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture.” No tragic, high culture equivalent perhaps. But Rich is not entirely correct when she goes on to say that “this cathexes between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story.”<sup>5</sup>

If this *tragic* story remains unwritten, it is because tragedy has always been assumed to be universal; speaking for and to a supposedly universal “mankind,” it has not been able to speak for and to womankind. But melodrama is a form that does not pretend to speak universally. It is clearly addressed to a particular bourgeois class and often—in works as diverse as *Pamela*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or the “woman’s film”—to the particular gender of woman.

In *The Melodramatic Imagination* Peter Brooks argues that late eighteenth and nineteenth century melodrama arose to fill the vacuum of a post-revolutionary world where traditional imperatives of truth and ethics had been violently questioned and yet in which there was still a need for truth and ethics. The aesthetic and cultural form of melodrama thus attempts to assert the ethical imperatives of a class that has lost the transcendent myth of a divinely ordained hierarchical community of common goals and values.<sup>6</sup>

Because the universe had lost its basic religious and moral order and its tragically divided but powerful ruler protagonists, the aesthetic form of melodrama took on the burden of rewarding the virtue and punishing the vice of undivided and comparatively powerless characters. The melodramatic mode thus took on an intense quality of wish-fulfillment, acting out the narrative resolution of conflicts derived from the economic, social, and political spheres in the private, emotionally primal sphere of home and family. Martha Vicinus notes, for example, that in much nineteenth century stage melodrama the home is the scene of this "reconciliation of the irreconcilable."<sup>7</sup> The domestic sphere where women and children predominate as protagonists whose only power derives from virtuous suffering thus emerges as an important source of specifically female wish-fulfillment. But if women audiences and readers have long identified with the virtuous sufferers of melodrama, the liberatory or oppressive meaning of such identification has not always been clear.

Much recent feminist film criticism has divided filmic narrative into male and female forms: "male" linear, action-packed narratives that encourage identification with predominantly male characters who "master" their environment; and "female" less linear narratives encouraging identification with passive, suffering heroines.<sup>8</sup> No doubt part of the enormous popularity of *Mildred Pierce* among feminist film critics lies with the fact that it illustrates the failure of the female subject (the film's misguided, long-suffering mother-hero who is overly infatuated with her daughter) to articulate her own point of view, even when her own voice-over introduces subjective flashbacks.<sup>9</sup> *Mildred Pierce* has been an important film for feminists precisely because its "male" film noir style offers such a blatant subversion of the mother's attempt to tell the story of her relationship to her daughter.

The failure of *Mildred Pierce* to offer either its female subject or its female viewer her own understanding of the film's narrative has made it a fascinating example of the way films can construct patriarchal subject-positions that subvert their ostensible subject matter. More to the point of the mother-daughter relation, however, is a film like *Stella Dallas*, which has recently begun to receive attention as a central work in the growing criticism of melodrama in general and maternal melodrama in particular.<sup>10</sup> Certainly the popularity of the original novel, of the 1925 (Henry King) and 1937 (King Vidor) film versions, and finally of the later long-running radio soap opera, suggests the special endurance of this mother-daughter love story across three

decades of female audiences. But it is in its film versions in particular, especially the King Vidor version starring Barbara Stanwyck, that we encounter an interesting test case for many recent theories of the cinematic presentation of female subjectivity and the female spectator.

Since so much of what has come to be called the classical narrative cinema concerns male subjects whose vision defines and circumscribes female objects, the mere existence in *Stella Dallas* of a female “look” as a central feature of the narrative is worthy of special scrutiny. Just what is different about the visual economy of such a film? What happens when a mother and daughter, who are so closely identified that the usual distinctions between subject and object do not apply, take one another as their primary objects of desire? What happens, in other words, when the look of desire articulates a rather different visual economy of mother-daughter possession and dispossession? What happens, finally, when the significant viewer of such a drama is also a woman? To fully answer these questions we must make a detour through some recent psychoanalytic thought on female subject formation and its relation to feminist film theory. We will then be in a better position to unravel the mother-daughter knot of this particular film. So for the time being we will abandon *Stella Dallas* to her forlorn place in the rain, gazing at her daughter through the big picture window—the enigma of the female look at, and in, the movies.

**Feminist Film Theory and Theories of Motherhood.** Much recent feminist film theory and criticism has been devoted to the description and analysis of Oedipal scenarios in which, as Laura Mulvey has written, woman is a passive image and man the active bearer of the look.<sup>11</sup> The major impetus of these forms of feminist criticism has been less concerned with the existence of female stereotypes than with their ideological, psychological, and textual means of production. To Claire Johnston, the very fact of the iconic representation of the cinematic image guarantees that women will be reduced to objects of an erotic male gaze. Johnston concludes that “woman as woman” cannot be represented at all within the dominant representational economy.<sup>12</sup> A primary reason for this conclusion is the hypothesis that the visual encounter with the female body produces in the male spectator a constant need to be reassured of his own bodily unity.

It is as if the male image producer and consumer can never get past the disturbing fact of sexual difference and so constantly produces and consumes images of women designed to reassure himself of his threatened unity. In this and other ways, feminist film theory has appropriated some key concepts from Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to explain why subjectivity always seems to be the province of the male.

According to Lacan, through the recognition of the sexual difference of a female “other” who lacks the phallus that is the symbol of patriarchal

privilege, the child gains entry into the symbolic order of human culture. This culture then produces narratives which repress the figure of lack that the mother—former figure of plenitude—has become. Given this situation, the question for woman becomes, as Christine Gledhill puts it: “*Can women speak, and can images of women speak for women?*”<sup>13</sup> Laura Mulvey’s answer, and the answer of much feminist criticism, would seem to be negative:

Woman’s desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it. She turns her child into the signifier of her own desire to possess a penis (the condition, she imagines, of entry into the symbolic). Either she must gracefully give way to the word, the Name of the Father and the Law, or else struggle to keep her child down with her in the half-light of the imaginary. Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.<sup>14</sup>

This description of the “visual pleasure of narrative cinema” delineates two avenues of escape which function to relieve the male viewer of the threat of the woman’s image. Mulvey’s now-familiar sketch of these two primary forms of mastery by which the male unconscious overcomes the threat of an encounter with the female body is aligned with two perverse pleasures associated with the male—the sadistic mastery of voyeurism and the more benign disavowal of fetishism. Both are ways of not-seeing, of either keeping a safe distance from, or misrecognizing what there is to see of, the woman’s difference.

The purpose of Mulvey’s analysis is to get “nearer to the roots” of women’s oppression in order to break with those codes that cannot produce female subjectivity. Her ultimate goal is thus an avant-garde filmmaking practice that will break with the voyeurism and fetishism of the narrative cinema so as to “free the look of the camera into its materiality in space and time,” and the “look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment.”<sup>15</sup> To Mulvey, only the radical destruction of the major forms of narrative pleasure so bound up in looking at women as objects can offer hope for a cinema that will be able to represent not woman as difference but the differences of women.

It has often been remarked that what is missing from Mulvey’s influential analysis of visual pleasure in cinematic narrative is any discussion of the position of the female viewing subject. Although many feminist works of film criticism have pointed to this absence, very few have ventured to fill it.<sup>16</sup> It is an understandably easier task to reject “dominant” or “institutional” modes of representation altogether than to discover within these existing modes glimpses of a more “authentic” (the term itself is indeed problematic) female subjectivity. And yet I believe that this latter is a more fruitful avenue of

approach, not only as a means of identifying what pleasure there is for women spectators within the classical narrative cinema, but also as a means of developing new representational strategies that will more fully speak to women audiences. For such speech must begin in a language that, however circumscribed within patriarchal ideology, will be recognized and understood by women. In this way, new feminist films can learn to build upon the pleasures of recognition that exist within filmic modes already familiar to women.

Instead of destroying the cinematic codes that have placed women as objects of spectacle at their center, what is needed, and has already begun to occur, is a theoretical and practical recognition of the ways in which women actually do speak to one another within patriarchy. Christine Gledhill, for example, makes a convincing case against the tendency of much semiotic and psychoanalytic feminist film criticism to blame realist representation for an ideological complicity with the suppression of semiotic difference. Such reasoning tends to believe that the simple rejection of the forms of realist representation will perform the revolutionary act of making the viewer aware of how images are produced. Gledhill argues that this awareness is not enough: the social construction of reality and of women cannot be defined in terms of signifying practice alone. "If a radical ideology such as feminism is to be defined as a means of providing a framework for political action, one must finally put one's finger on the scales, enter some kind of realist epistemology."<sup>17</sup>

But what kind? Any attempt to construct heroines as strong and powerful leaves us vulnerable, as Gledhill notes, to the charge of male identification: However we try to cast our potential feminine identifications, all available positions are already constructed from the place of the patriarchal other so as to repress our 'real' difference. Thus the unspoken remains unknown, and the speakable reproduces what we know, patriarchal reality.<sup>18</sup>

One way out of the dilemma is "the location of those spaces in which women, out of their socially constructed differences as women, can and do resist."<sup>19</sup> These include discourses produced primarily for and (often, but not always) by women and which address the contradictions that women encounter under patriarchy: women's advice columns, magazine fiction, soap operas, and melodramatic "women's films." All are places where women speak to one another in languages that grow out of their specific social roles—as mothers, housekeepers, caretakers of all sorts.<sup>20</sup>

Gledhill's assertion that discourses about the social, economic, and emotional concerns of women are consumed by predominantly female audiences could be complemented by the further assertion that *some* of these discourses are also differently inscribed to necessitate a very different, female reading. This is what I hope to show with respect to *Stella Dallas*. My argument, then, is not only that some maternal melodramas have historically addressed female audiences about issues of primary concern to women, but that these

melodramas also have reading positions structured into their texts that demand a female reading competence. This competence derives from the different way women take on their identities under patriarchy and is a direct result of the social fact of female mothering. It is thus with a view to applying the significance of the social construction of female identity to the female positions constructed by the maternal melodrama that I offer the following cursory summary of recent feminist theories of female identity and motherhood.

While Freud was forced, at least in his later writing, to abandon a theory of parallel male and female development and to acknowledge the greater importance of the girl's pre-Oedipal connection to her mother, he could only view such a situation as a deviation from the path of "normal" (e.g., male heterosexual) separation and individuation.<sup>21</sup> The result was a theory that left women in an apparent state of regressive connection to their mothers.

What Freud viewed as a regrettable lack in a girl's self development, feminist theorists now view with less disparagement. However else they may differ over the consequences of female mothering, most agree that it allows women not only to remain in connection with their first love objects but to extend the model of this connectedness to all other relations with the world.<sup>22</sup>

In *The Reproduction of Mothering* the American sociologist Nancy Chodorow attempts to account for the fact that "women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother."<sup>23</sup> She shows that neither biology nor intentional role training can explain the social organization of gender roles that consign women to the private sphere of home and family, and men to the public sphere that has permitted them dominance. The desire and ability to mother is produced, along with masculinity and femininity, within a division of labor that has already placed women in the position of primary caretakers. Superimposed on this division of labor are the two "oedipal asymmetries"<sup>24</sup> that Freud acknowledged: that girls enter the triangular Oedipal relation later than boys; that girls have a greater continuity of pre-Oedipal symbiotic connection to the mother.

In other words, girls never entirely break with their original relationship to their mothers, because their sexual identities as women do not depend upon such a break. Boys, however, must break with their primary identification with their mothers in order to become male identified. This means that boys define themselves as males negatively, by differentiation from their primary caretaker who (in a culture that has traditionally valued women as mothers first, workers second) is female.

The boy separates from his mother to identify with his father and take on a masculine identity of greater autonomy. The girl, on the other hand, takes on her identity as a woman in a positive process of becoming like, not different than, her mother. Although she must ultimately transfer her primary object choice to her father first and then to men in general if she is to become



a heterosexual woman, she still never breaks with the original bond to her mother in the same way the boy does. She merely *adds* her love for her father, and finally her love for a man (if she becomes heterosexual) to her original relation to her mother. This means that a boy develops his masculine gender identification in the *absence* of a continuous and ongoing relationship with his father, while a girl develops her feminine gender identity in the *presence* of an ongoing relationship with the specific person of her mother.

In other words, the masculine subject position is based on a rejection of a connection to the mother and the adoption of a gender role identified with a cultural stereotype, while the female subject position identifies with a specific mother. Women's relatedness and men's denial of relatedness are in turn appropriate to the social division of their roles in our culture: to the man's role as producer outside the home and the woman's role as reproducer inside it.<sup>25</sup>

Chodorow's analysis of the connectedness of the mother-daughter bond has pointed the way to a new value placed on the multiple and continuous female identity capable of fluidly shifting between the identity of mother and daughter.<sup>26</sup> Unlike Freud, she does not assume that the separation and autonomy of the male identification process is a norm from which women deviate. She assumes, rather, that the current social arrangement of exclusive female mothering has prepared men to participate in a world of often alienated work, with a limited ability to achieve intimacy.<sup>27</sup>

Thus Chodorow and others<sup>28</sup> have questioned the very standards of unity and autonomy by which human identity has typically been measured. And they have done so without recourse to a biologically determined essence of femaleness.<sup>29</sup>

Like Nancy Chodorow, the French feminist psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray turns to the problems of Freud's original attempt to sketch identical stages of development for both male and female. In *Speculum de l'autre femme* Irigaray echoes Chodorow's concern with "Oedipal asymmetries." But what Irigaray emphasizes is the *visual* nature of Freud's scenario—the fact that sexual difference is originally perceived as an absence of the male genitalia rather than the presence of female genitalia. In a chapter entitled "Blind Spot for an Old Dream of Symmetry," the "blind spot" consists of a male vision trapped in an "Oedipal destiny" that cannot *see* woman's sex and can thus only represent it in terms of the masculine subject's own original complementary other: the mother.<sup>30</sup>

"Woman" is represented within this system as either the all-powerful (phallic) mother of the child's pre-Oedipal imaginary or as the unempowered (castrated) mother of its post-Oedipal symbolic. What is left out of such a system of representation is the whole of woman's pleasure—a pleasure that cannot be measured in phallic terms.

But what Freud devalued and repressed in the female body, Irigaray and

other French feminists engaged in “writing the female body” in an *écriture féminine*,<sup>31</sup> are determined to emphasize. In *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un* (This sex which is not one) Irigaray celebrates the multiple and diffuse pleasures of a female body and a female sex that is not just one thing, but several. But when forced to enter into the “dominant scopic economy” of visual pleasure she is immediately relegated, as Mulvey has also pointed out with respect to film, to the passive position of “the beautiful object.”<sup>32</sup>

Irigaray’s admittedly utopian<sup>33</sup> solution to the problem of how women can come to represent themselves to themselves is nevertheless important. For if women cannot establish the connection between their bodies and language, they risk either having to forego all speaking of the body—in a familiar puritanical repression of an excessive female sexuality—or they risk an essentialist celebration of a purely biological determination. Irigaray thus proposes a community of women relating to and speaking to one another outside the constraints of a masculine language that reduces everything to its own need for unity and identity—a “female homosexuality” opposed to the reigning “male homosexuality” that currently governs the relations between both men and men, and men and women.<sup>34</sup>

A “female homosexual economy” would thus challenge the dominant order and make it possible for woman to represent herself to herself. This suggests an argument similar to that of Adrienne Rich in her article “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Rich argues that lesbianism is an important alternative to the male economy of dominance. Whether or not a woman’s sexual preferences are actually homosexual, the mere fact of “lesbian existence” proves that it is possible to resist the dominating values of the male colonizer with a more nurturing and empathic relationship similar to mothering.<sup>35</sup> The female body is as necessary to Rich as it is to Irigaray as the place to begin.

Adrienne Rich’s critique of psychoanalysis is based on the notion that its fundamental patriarchal premises foreclose the envisioning of relationships between women outside of patriarchy. Irigaray’s recourse to the female body ironically echoes Rich’s own but it is constructed from *within* psychoanalytic theory. The importance of both is not simply that they see lesbianism as a refuge from an oppressive phallic economy—although it certainly is that for many women—but that it is a theoretical way out of the bind of the unrepresented, and unrepresentable, female body.

The excitement generated when women get together, when they go to the market together “to profit from their own value, to talk to each other, to desire each other,” is not to be underestimated.<sup>36</sup> For only by learning to recognize and then to represent a difference that is not different to other women, can women begin to see themselves. The trick, however, is not to stop there; woman’s recognition of herself in the bodies of other women is only a necessary first step to an understanding of the interaction of body and psyche, and the distance that separates them.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the most valuable attempt to understand this interaction is Julia Kristeva's work on the maternal body and pre-Oedipal sexuality. Like Irigaray, Kristeva attempts to speak the pre-Oedipal relations of woman to woman. But unlike Irigaray, she does so with the knowledge that such speech is never entirely authentic, never entirely free of the phallic influence of symbolic language. In other words, she stresses the necessity of positing a place from which women can speak themselves, all the while recognizing that such places do not exist. That is, it cannot be conceived or represented outside of the symbolic language which defines women negatively.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, what Kristeva proposes is a self-conscious dialectic between two imperfect forms of language. The first is what she calls the "emiotic": a pre-verbal, maternal language of rhythm, tone and color linked to the body contact with the mother before the child is differentiated by entrance into the symbolic. The second is the "symbolic" proper, characterized by logic, syntax, and a phallographic abstraction.<sup>39</sup> According to Kristeva, all human subjects articulate themselves through the interaction of these two modes. The value of this conception is that we no longer find ourselves locked into an investigation of different sexual *identities*, but are freed rather into an investigation of *sexual differentiations*—subject positions that are associated with maternal or paternal functions.

Speaking from the mother's position, Kristeva shows that maternity is characterized by division. The mother is possessed of an internal heterogeneity beyond her control:

Cells fuse, split and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not here."<sup>40</sup>

But even as she speaks from this space of the mother, Kristeva notes that it is vacant, that there is no unified subject present there. Yet she speaks anyway, consciously recognizing the patriarchal illusion of the all-powerful and whole phallic mother. For Kristeva it is the dialectic of two inadequate and incomplete sexually *differentiated* subject positions that is important. The dialectic between a maternal body that is too diffuse, contradictory, and polymorphous to be represented and a paternal body that is channeled and repressed into a single representable significance makes it possible for woman to be represented at all.

So, as Jane Gallop notes, women are not so essentially and exclusively body that they must remain eternally unrepresentable.<sup>41</sup> But the dialectic between that which is pure body and therefore escapes representation and that which is a finished and fixed representation makes possible a different kind of representation that escapes the rigidity of fixed identity. With this notion of a dialectic between the maternal unrepresentable and the paternal already-

represented we can begin to look for a way out of the theoretical bind of the representation of women in film and at the way female spectators are likely to read *Stella Dallas* and its ambivalent final scene.

**“Something else besides a mother.”** Stella’s story begins with her attempts to attract the attention of the upper-class Stephen Dallas (John Boles), who has buried himself in the small town of Milhampton after a scandal in his family ruined his plans for marriage. Like any ambitious working-class girl with looks as her only resource, she attempts to improve herself by pursuing an upper-class man. To distinguish herself in his eyes, she calculatingly brings her brother lunch at the mill where Stephen is the boss, insincerely playing the role of motherly caretaker. The refinement that she brings to this role distinguishes her from her own drab, overworked, slavish mother (played by Marjorie Main, without her usual comic touch).

During their brief courtship, Stella and Stephen go to the movies. On the screen they see couples dancing in an elegant milieu followed by a happy-ending embrace. Stella is absorbed in the story and weeps at the end. Outside the theater she tells Stephen of her desire to “be like all the people in the movies doing everything well-bred and refined.” She imagines his whole world to be like this glamorous scene. Her story will become, in a sense, the unsuccessful attempt to place herself in the scene of the movie without losing that original spectatorial pleasure of looking on from afar.

Once married to Stephen, Stella seems about to realize this dream. In the small town that once ignored her she can now go the “River Club” and associate with the smart set. But motherhood intervenes, forcing her to cloister herself unhappily during the long months of pregnancy. Finally out of the hospital, she insists on a night at the country club with the smart set that has so far eluded her. (Actually many of them are a vulgar *nouveau-riche* lot of whom Stephen, upper-class snob that he is, heartily disapproves.) In her strenuous efforts to join in the fun of the wealthy, Stella makes a spectacle of herself in Stephen’s eyes. He sees her for the first time as the working-class woman that she is and judges her harshly, reminding her that she once wanted to be something more than what she is. She, in turn, criticizes his stiffness and asks *him* to do some of the adapting for a change.

When Stephen asks Stella to come with him to New York City for a fresh start as the properly upper-class Mrs. Dallas, she refuses to leave the only world she knows. Part of her reason must be that to leave this world would also be to leave the only identity she has ever achieved, to become nobody all over again. In the little mill town where Stephen had come to forget himself, Stella can find herself by measuring the distance traveled between her working-class girlhood and upper-class wifedom. It is as if she needs to be able to measure this distance in order to possess her new self from the vantage point of the young girl she once was with Stephen at the movies.

Without the memory of this former self that the town provides, she loses the already precarious possession of her own identity.

As Stephen drifts away from her, Stella plunges into another aspect of her identity: motherhood. After her initial resistance, it is a role she finds surprisingly compelling. But she never resigns herself to being *only* a mother. In Stephen's absence she continues to seek an innocent but lively pleasure—in particular with the raucous Ed Munn. As her daughter Laurel grows up, we observe a series of scenes that compromise Stella in the eyes of Stephen (during those rare moments he comes home) and the more straight-laced members of the community. In each case Stella is merely guilty of seeking a little fun—whether by playing music and drinking with Ed or playing a practical joke with itching powder on a train. Each time we are assured of Stella's primary commitment to motherhood and of her many good qualities as a mother. (She even says to Ed Munn, in response to his crude proposal: "I don't think there's a man livin' who could get me going anymore.") But each time the repercussions of the incident are the isolation of mother and daughter from the upper-class world to which they aspire to belong but into which only Laurel fits. A particularly poignant moment is Laurel's birthday party where mother and daughter receive, one by one, the regrets of the guests. Thus the innocent daughter suffers for the "sins" of taste and class of the mother. The end result, however, is a greater bond between the two as each sadly but nobly puts on a good face for the other and marches into the dining room to celebrate the birthday alone.

In each of the incidents of Stella's transgression of proper behavior, there is a moment when we first see Stella's innocent point of view and then the point of view of the community or estranged husband that judges her a bad mother.<sup>42</sup> Their judgment rests on the fact that Stella insists on making her motherhood a pleasurable experience by sharing center stage with her daughter. The one thing she will not do, at least until the end, is retire to the background.

One basic conflict of the film thus comes to revolve around the *excessive presence* of Stella's body and dress. She increasingly flaunts an exaggeratedly feminine presence that the offended community prefers not to see. (Barbara Stanwyck's own excessive performance contributes to this effect. I can think of no other film star of the period so willing to exceed both the bounds of good taste and sex appeal in a single performance.) But the more ruffles, feathers, furs, and clanking jewelry that Stella dons, the more she emphasizes her pathetic inadequacy.

Her strategy can only backfire in the eyes of an upper-class restraint that values a streamlined and sleek ideal of femininity. To these eyes Stella is a travesty, an overdone masquerade of what it means to be a woman. At the fancy hotel to which Stella and Laurel repair for their one fling at upper-class life together, a young college man exclaims at the sight of Stella, "That's not

a woman, that's a Christmas tree!" Stella, however, could never understand such a backward economy, just as she cannot understand her upper-class husband's attempts to lessen the abrasive impact of her presence by correcting her English and toning down her dress. She counters his efforts with the defiant claim, "I've always been known to have stacks of style!"

"Style" is the war paint she applies more thickly with each new assault on her legitimacy as a woman and a mother. One particularly affecting scene shows her sitting before the mirror of her dressing table as Laurel tells her of the "natural" elegance and beauty of Helen Morrison, the woman who has replaced Stella in Stephen's affections. Stella's only response is to apply more cold cream. When she accidentally gets cold cream on Laurel's photo of the ideal Mrs. Morrison, Laurel becomes upset and runs off to clean it. What is most moving in the scene is the emotional complicity of Laurel, who soon realizes the extent to which her description has hurt her mother, and silently turns to the task of applying more peroxide to Stella's hair. The scene ends with mother and daughter before the mirror tacitly relating to one another through the medium of the feminine mask—each putting on a good face for the other, just as they did at the birthday party.

"Stacks of style," layers of make-up, clothes, and jewelry—these are, of course, the typical accouterments of the fetishized woman. Yet such fetishization seems out of place in a "woman's film" addressed to a predominantly female audience. More typically, the woman's film's preoccupation with a victimized and suffering womanhood has tended, as Mary Ann Doane has shown, to repress and hystericalize women's bodies in a medical discourse of the afflicted or in the paranoia of the uncanny.<sup>43</sup>

We might ask, then, what effect a fetishized female image has in the context of a film "addressed" and "possessed by" women? Certainly this is one situation in which the woman's body does not seem likely to pose the threat of castration—since the significant viewers of (and within) the film are all female. In psychoanalytic terms, the fetish is that which disavows or compensates for the woman's lack of a penis. As we have seen above, for the male viewer the successful fetish deflects attention away from what is "really" lacking by calling attention to (over-valuing) other aspects of woman's difference. But at the same time it also inscribes the woman in a "masquerade of femininity"<sup>44</sup> that forever revolves around her "lack." Thus, at the extreme, the entire female body becomes a fetish substitute for the phallus she doesn't possess. The beautiful (successfully fetishized) woman thus represents an eternal essence of biologically determined femininity constructed from the point of view, so to speak, of the phallus.

In *Stella Dallas*, however, the fetishization of Stanwyck's Stella is unsuccessful; the masquerade of femininity is all too obvious; and the significant point of view on all this is female. For example, at the fancy hotel where Stella makes a "Christmas Tree" spectacle of herself she is as oblivious as

ever to the shocking effect of her appearance. But Laurel experiences the shame of her friends' scorn. The scene in which Laurel experiences this shame is a grotesque parody of Stella's fondest dream of being like all the glamorous people in the movies. Stella has put all of her energy and resources into becoming this glamorous image. But incapacitated by a cold, as she once was by pregnancy, she must remain off-scene as Laurel makes a favorable impression. When she finally makes her grand entrance on the scene, Stella is spied by Laurel and her friends in a large mirror over a soda fountain. The mirror functions as the framed screen that reflects the parody of the image of glamour to which Stella once aspired. Unwilling to acknowledge their relation, Laurel runs out. Later, she insists that they leave. On the train home, Stella overhears Laurel's friends joking about the vulgar Mrs. Dallas. It is then that she decides to send Laurel to live with Stephen and Mrs. Morrison and to give Laurel up for her own good. What is significant, however, is that Stella overhears the conversation at the same time Laurel does—they are in upper and lower berths of the train, each hoping that the other is asleep, each pretending to be asleep to the other. So Stella does not just experience her own humiliation; she sees for the first time the travesty she has become by sharing in her daughter's humiliation.

By seeing herself through her daughter's eyes, Stella also sees something more. For the first time Stella sees the reality of her social situation from the vantage point of her daughter's understanding, but increasingly upper-class, system of values: that she is a struggling, uneducated woman doing the best she can with the resources at her disposal. And it is *this* vision, through her daughter's sympathetic, mothering eyes—eyes that perceive, understand, and forgive the social graces Stella lacks—that determines her to perform the masquerade that will alienate Laurel forever by proving to her what the patriarchy has claimed to know all along: that it is not possible to combine womanly desire with motherly duty.

It is at this point that Stella claims, falsely, to want to be "something else besides a mother." The irony is not only that by now there is really nothing else she wants to be, but also that in pretending this to Laurel she must act out a painful parody of her fetishized self. She thus resurrects the persona of the "good-times" woman she used to want to be (but never entirely was) only to convince Laurel that she is an unworthy mother. In other words, she proves her very worthiness to be a mother (her desire for her daughter's material and social welfare) by acting out a patently false scenario of narcissistic self-absorption—she pretends to ignore Laurel while lounging about in a negligee, smoking a cigarette, listening to jazz, and reading a magazine called "Love."

In this scene the conventional image of the fetishized woman is given a peculiar, even parodic, twist. For where the conventional masquerade of femininity can be read as an attempt to cover up supposedly biological "lacks"

with a compensatory excess of connotatively feminine gestures, clothes, and accouterments, here fetishization functions as a blatantly pathetic disavowal of much more pressing social lacks—of money, education, and power. The spectacle Stella stages for Laurel's eyes thus displaces the real social and economic causes of her presumed inadequacy as a mother onto a pretended desire for fulfillment as a woman—to be “something else besides a mother.”

At the beginning of the film Stella pretended a maternal concern she did not really possess (in bringing lunch to her brother in order to flirt with Stephen) in order to find a better home. Now she pretends a lack of the same concern in order to send Laurel to a better home. Both roles are patently false. And though neither allows us to view the “authentic” woman beneath the mask, the succession of roles ending in the final transcendent self-effacement of the window scene—in which Stella forsakes all her masks in order to become the anonymous spectator of her daughter's role as bride—permits a glimpse at the social and economic realities that have produced such roles. Stella's real offense, in the eyes of the community that so ruthlessly ostracizes her, is to have attempted to play both roles at once.

Are we to conclude, then, that the film simply punishes her for these untimely resistances to her proper role? E. Ann Kaplan has argued that such is the case, and that throughout the film Stella's point of view is undercut by those of the upper-class community—Stephen, or the snooty townspeople—who disapprove of her behavior. Kaplan notes, for example, that a scene may begin from Stella's point of view but shift, as in the case of an impromptu party with Ed Munn, to the more judgmental point of view of Stephen halfway through.<sup>45</sup>

I would counter, however, that these multiple, often conflicting, points of view—including Laurel's failure to see through her mother's act—prevent such a monolithic view of the female subject. Kaplan argues, for example, that the film punishes Stella for her resistances to a properly patriarchal view of motherhood by turning her first into a spectacle for a disapproving upper-class gaze and then finally into a mere spectator, locked outside the action in the final window scene that ends the film.<sup>46</sup>

Certainly this final scene functions to efface Stella even as it glorifies her sacrificial act of motherly love. Self-exiled from the world into which her daughter is marrying, Stella loses both her daughter and her (formerly fetishized) self to become an abstract (and absent) ideal of motherly sacrifice. Significantly, Stella appears in this scene for the first time stripped of the exaggerated marks of femininity—the excessive make-up, furs, feathers, clanking jewelry, and ruffled dresses—that have been the weapons of her defiant assertions that a woman *can* be “something else besides a mother.”

It would be possible to stop here and take this ending as Hollywood's last word on the mother, as evidence of her ultimate unrepresentability in any but patriarchal terms. Certainly if we only remember Stella as she appears



here at the end of the film, as Val in French's *The Women's Room* remembers her, then we see her only at the moment when she becomes representable in terms of a "phallic economy" that idealizes the woman as mother and in so doing, as Irigary argues, represses everything else about her. But although the final moment of the film "resolves" the contradiction of Stella's attempt to be a woman *and* a mother by eradicating both, the 108 minutes leading up to this moment present the heroic attempt to live out the contradiction.<sup>47</sup> It seems likely, then, that a female spectator would be inclined to view even this ending as she has the rest of the film: from a variety of different subject positions. In other words, the female spectator tends to identify with contradiction itself—with contradictions located at the heart of the socially constructed roles of daughter, wife, *and* mother—rather than with the single person of the mother.

In this connection the role of Helen Morrison, the upper-class widowed mother whom Stephen will be free to marry with Stella out of the way, takes on special importance. Helen is everything Stella is not: genteel, discreet, self-effacing, and sympathetic with everyone's problems—including Stella's. She is, for example, the only person in the film to see through Stella's ruse of alienating Laurel. And it is she who, knowing Stella's finer instincts, leaves open the drapes that permit Stella's vision of Laurel's marriage inside her elegant home.

In writing about the narrative form of daytime soap operas, Tania Modleski has noted that the predominantly female viewers of soaps do not identify with a main controlling figure the way viewers of more classic forms of narrative identify. The very form of soap opera encourages identification with multiple points of view. At one moment, female viewers identify with a woman united with her lover, at the next with the sufferings of her rival. While the effect of identifying with a single controlling protagonist is to make the spectator feel empowered, the effect of multiple identification in the diffused soap opera is to divest the spectator of power, but to increase empathy. "The subject/spectator of soaps, it could be said, is constituted as a sort of ideal mother: a person who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all), and who has no demands or claims of her own (she identifies with no character exclusively)."<sup>48</sup>

In *Stella Dallas* Helen is clearly the representative of this idealized, empathic but powerless mother. Ann Kaplan has argued that female spectators learn from Helen Morrison's example that such is the proper role of the mother; that Stella has up until now illicitly hogged the screen. By the time Stella has made her sacrifice and become the mere spectator of her daughter's apotheosis, her joy in her daughter's success assures us, in Kaplan's words, "of her satisfaction in being reduced to spectator. . . . While the cinema spectator feels a certain sadness in Stella's position, we also identify with

Laurel and with her attainment of what we have all been socialized to desire; that is, romantic marriage into the upper class. We thus accede to the necessity for Stella's sacrifice."<sup>49</sup>

But do we? As Kaplan herself notes, the female spectator is identified with a variety of conflicting points of view as in the TV soap opera: Stella, Laurel, Helen, and Stephen cannot resolve their conflicts without someone getting hurt. Laurel loses her mother and visibly suffers from this loss; Stella loses her daughter and her identity; Helen wins Stephen but powerlessly suffers for everyone including herself (when Stella had refused to divorce Stephen). Only Stephen is entirely free from suffering at the end, but this is precisely because he is characteristically oblivious to the suffering of others. For the film's ending to be perceived as entirely without problem, we would have to identify with this least sensitive and, therefore, least sympathetic point of view.

Instead, we identify, like the ideal mother viewer of soaps, with *all* the conflicting points of view. Because Helen is herself such a mother, she becomes an important, but not an exclusive, focus of spectatorial identification. She becomes, for example, the significant witness of Stella's sacrifice. Her one action in the entire film is to leave open the curtains—an act that helps put Stella in the same passive and powerless position of spectating that Helen is in herself. But if this relegation to the position of spectator outside the action resolves the narrative, it is a resolution not satisfactory to any of its female protagonists.

Thus, where Kaplan sees the ending of *Stella Dallas* as satisfying patriarchal demands for the repression of the active and involved aspects of the mother's role, and as teaching female spectators to take their dubious pleasures from this empathic position outside the action, I would argue that the ending is too multiply identified, too dialectical in Julia Kristeva's sense of the struggle between maternal and paternal forms of language, to encourage such a response. Certainly the film has constructed concluding images of motherhood—first the high-toned Helen and finally a toned-down Stella—for the greater power and convenience of the father. But because the father's own spectatorial empathy is so lacking—Stephen is here much as he was with Stella at the movies, present but not identified himself—we cannot see it that way. We see instead the contradictions between what the patriarchal resolution of the film asks us to see—the mother “in her place” as spectator, abdicating her former position *in* the scene—and what we as empathic, identifying female spectators can't help but feel—the loss of mother to daughter and daughter to mother.

This double vision seems typical of the experience of most female spectators at the movies. One explanation for it, we might recall, is Nancy Chodorow's theory that female identity is formed through a process of double identification. The girl identifies with her primary love object—her mother—

and then, without ever dropping the first identification, with her father. According to Chodorow, the woman's sense of self is based upon a continuity of relationship that ultimately prepares her for the empathic, identifying role of the mother. Unlike the male who must constantly differentiate himself from his original object of identification in order to take on a male identity, the woman's ability to identify with a variety of different subject positions makes her a very different kind of spectator.

Feminist film theorists have tended to view this multiple identificatory power of the female spectator with some misgiving. In an article on the female spectator, Mary Ann Doane has suggested that when the female spectator looks at the cinematic image of a woman, she is faced with two main possibilities: she can either over-identify (as in the masochistic dramas typical of the woman's film) with the woman on the screen and thus lose herself in the image by taking this woman as her own narcissistic object of desire; or she can temporarily identify with the position of the masculine voyeur and subject this same woman to a controlling gaze that insists on the distance and difference between them.<sup>50</sup> In this case she becomes, as Laura Mulvey notes, a temporary transvestite.<sup>51</sup> Either way, according to Doane, she loses herself.

Doane argues that the only way a female spectator can keep from losing herself in this over-identification is by negotiating a distance from the image of her like—by reading this image as a sign as opposed to an iconic image that requires no reading. When the woman spectator regards a female body enveloped in an exaggerated masquerade of femininity, she encounters a sign that requires such a reading. We have seen that throughout a good part of *Stella Dallas* this is what Stella does with respect to her own body. For Doane, then, one way out of the dilemma of female over-identification with the image on the screen is for this image to act out a masquerade of femininity that manufactures a distance between spectator and image, to “generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by women.”<sup>52</sup>

In other words, Doane thinks that female spectators need to borrow some of the distance and separation from the image that male spectators experience. She suggests that numerous avant-garde practices of distanciation can produce this necessary distance. This puts us back to Mulvey's argument that narrative pleasure must be destroyed by avant-garde practices. I would argue instead that this manufacturing of distance, this female voyeurism-with-a-difference, is an aspect of *every* female spectator's gaze at the image of her like. For rather than adopting either the distance and mastery of the masculine voyeur or the over-identification of Doane's woman who loses herself in the image, the female spectator is in a constant state of juggling all positions at once.

Ruby Rich has written that women experience films much more dialectically than men. “Brecht once described the exile as the ultimate dialectician

in that the exile lives the tension of two different cultures. That's precisely the sense in which the woman spectator is an equally inevitable dialectician."<sup>53</sup> The female spectator's look is thus a dialectic of two (in themselves) inadequate and incomplete (sexually and socially) differentiated subject positions. Just as Julia Kristeva has shown that it is the dialectic of a maternal body that is channeled and repressed into a single, univocal significance that makes it possible for women to be represented at all, so does a similar dialectic inform female spectatorship when a female point of view is genuinely inscribed in the text.

We have seen in *Stella Dallas* how the mediation of the mother and daughter's look at one another radically alters the representation of them both. We have also seen that the viewer cannot choose a single "main controlling" point of identification but must alternate between a number of conflicting points of view, none of which can be satisfactorily reconciled. But the window scene at the end of the film would certainly seem to be the moment when all the above contradictions collapse into a single patriarchal vision of the mother as pure spectator (divested of her excessive bodily presence) and the daughter as the (now properly fetishized) object of vision. Although it is true that this ending, by separating mother and daughter, places each within a visual economy that defines them from the perspective of patriarchy, the female spectator's own look at each of them does not acquiesce in such a phallic visual economy of voyeurism and fetishism.

For in looking at Stella's own look at her daughter through a window that strongly resembles a movie screen,<sup>54</sup> the female spectator does not see and believe the same way Stella does. In this final scene, Stella is no different than the naive spectator she was when, as a young woman, she went to the movies with Stephen. In order to justify her sacrifice, she must *believe* in the reality of the cinematic illusion she sees: bride and groom kneeling before the priest, proud father looking on. We, however, *know* the artifice and suffering behind it—Laurel's disappointment that her mother has not attended the wedding; Helen's manipulation of the scene that affords Stella her glimpse; Stella's own earlier manipulation of Laurel's view of her "bad" motherhood. So when we look at Stella looking at the glamorous and artificial "movie" of her daughter's life, we cannot, like Stella, naively believe in the reality of the happy ending, any more than we believe in the reality of the silent movements and hackneyed gestures of the glamorous movie Stella once saw.

Because the female spectator has seen the cost to both Laurel and Stella of the daughter's having entered the frame, of having become the properly fetishized image of womanhood, she cannot, like Stella, believe in happiness for either. She knows better because she has seen what each has had to give up to assume these final roles. But isn't it just such a balance of knowledge and belief (of the fetishist's contradictory phrase "I know very well but just the same. . .")<sup>55</sup> that has characterized the sophisticated juggling act of the ideal cinematic spectator?

The psychoanalytic model of cinematic pleasure has been based on the phenomenon of fetishistic disavowal: the contradictory gesture of *believing* in an illusion (the cinematic image, the female penis) and yet *knowing* that it is an illusion, an imaginary signifier. This model sets up a situation in which the woman becomes a kind of failed fetishist: lacking a penis she lacks the biological foundation to engage in the sophisticated game of juggling presence and absence in cinematic representation; hence her presumed over-identification, her lack of the knowledge of illusion<sup>56</sup> and the resulting one, two, and three handkerchief movies. But the female spectator of *Stella Dallas* finds herself balancing a very different kind of knowledge and belief than the mere existence or non-existence of the female phallus. She *knows* that women can find no genuine form of representation under patriarchal structures of voyeuristic or fetishistic viewing, because she has seen Stella lose herself as a woman and as a mother. But at the same time she *believes* that women exist outside this phallic economy, because she has glimpsed moments of resistance in which two women have been able to represent themselves to themselves through the mediation of their own gazes.

This is a very different form of disavowal. It is both a *knowing* recognition of the limitations of woman's representation in patriarchal language and a contrary *belief* in the illusion of a pre-Oedipal space between women free of the mastery and control of the male look. The contradiction is as compelling for the woman as for the male fetishist, even more so because it is not based on the presence or absence of an anatomical organ, but on the dialectic of the woman's socially constructed position under patriarchy.

It is in a very different sense, then, that the psychoanalytic concepts of voyeurism and fetishism can inform a feminist theory of cinematic spectatorship—not as inscribing woman totally on the side of the passive object who is merely seen, as Mulvey and others have so influentially argued, but by examining the contradictions that animate women's very active and fragmented ways of seeing.

I would not go so far as to argue that these contradictions operate for the female viewer in every film about relations between women. But the point of focusing on a film that both addresses female audiences and contains important structures of viewing *between* women is to suggest that it does not take a radical and consciously feminist break with patriarchal ideology to represent the contradictory aspects of the woman's position under patriarchy. It does not even take the ironic distancing devices of, for example, the Sirkian melodrama to generate the kind of active, critical response that sees the work of ideology in the film. Laura Mulvey has written that the ironic endings of Sirkian melodrama are progressive in their defiance of unity and closure:

It is as though the fact of having a female point of view dominating the narrative produces an excess which precludes satisfaction. If the melodrama offers a fantasy escape for the identifying women in the audience, the illusion

is so strongly marked by recognisable, real and familiar traps that the escape is closer to a daydream than a fairy story. The few Hollywood films made with a female audience in mind evoke contradictions rather than reconciliation, with the alternative to mute surrender to society's overt pressures lying in defeat by its unconscious laws.<sup>57</sup>

Although Mulvey here speaks primarily of the ironic Sirkian melodrama, her description of the contradictions encountered by the female spectator apply in a slightly different way to the very un-ironic *Stella Dallas*. I would argue that *Stella Dallas* is a progressive film not because it defies both unity and closure, but because the definitive closure of its ending produces no parallel unity in its spectator. And because the film has constructed its spectator in a female subject position locked into a primary identification with another female subject, it is possible for this spectator, like Val—the mother spectator from *The Women's Room* whose reaction to the film is quoted at the head of this article—to impose her own radical feminist reading on the film. Without such female subject positions inscribed within the text, the stereotypical self-sacrificing mother character would flatten into the mere maternal essences of so many motherly figures of melodrama.

*Stella Dallas* is a classic maternal melodrama played with a very straight face. Its ambivalences and contradictions are not cultivated with the intention of revealing the work of patriarchal ideology within it. But like any melodrama that offers a modicum of realism yet conforms to the “reconciliation of the irreconcilable” proper to the genre,<sup>58</sup> it must necessarily produce, when dealing with conflicts among women, what Val calls a “shock of recognition.” This shock is not the pleasurable recognition of a verisimilitude that generates naive belief, but the shock of seeing, as Val explains, “how they got us to consent to our own eradication.” Val and other female spectators typically do *not* consent to such eradicating resolutions. They, and we, resist the only way we can by struggling with the contradictions inherent in these images of ourselves and our situation. It is a terrible underestimation of the female viewer to presume that she is wholly seduced by a naive belief in these masochistic images, that she has allowed these images to put her in her place the way the films themselves put their women characters in their place.

It seems, then, that Adrienne Rich's eloquent plea for works that can embody the “essential female tragedy” of mother-daughter passion, rapture, and loss is misguided but only with respect to the mode of tragedy. I hope to have begun to show that this loss finds expression under patriarchy in the “distorted” and “misused” cathexes of the maternal melodrama. For unlike tragedy, melodrama does not reconcile its audience to an inevitable suffering. Rather than raging against a fate that the audience has learned to accept, the female hero often accepts a fate that the audience at least partially questions.

The divided female spectator identifies with the woman whose very

triumph is often in her own victimization, but she also criticizes the price of a transcendent “eradication” which the victim-hero must pay. Thus, although melodrama’s impulse towards the just “happy ending” usually places the woman hero in a final position of subordination, the “lesson” for female audiences is certainly not to become similarly eradicated themselves. For all its masochism, for all its frequent devaluation of the individual person of the mother (as opposed to the abstract ideal of motherhood), the maternal melodrama presents a recognizable picture of woman’s ambivalent position under patriarchy that has been an important source of realistic reflections of women’s lives. This may be why the most effective feminist films of recent years have been those works—like Sally Potter’s *Thriller*, Michelle Citron’s *Daughter Rite*, Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman. . .*, and even Jacques Rivette’s *Celine and Julie Go Boating*—that work *within and against* the expectations of female self-sacrifice experienced in maternal melodrama.

### Notes.

1. *The Women’s Room* (New York: Summit Books, 1977), 227.
2. An interesting and comprehensive introduction to this sub-genre can be found in Christian Viviani’s “Who is Without Sin? The Maternal Melodrama in American Film, 1930-1939,” *Wide Angle* 4, no. 2 (1980): 4-17. Viviani traces the history of maternal melodrama in American films back to the original French play *Madame X* about an adulterous woman who expiates her sin in lifelong separation from a son whose social rise would be jeopardized by the revelation of her relation to him. Two successful twenties screen versions of *Madame X* set a pattern of imitators. Within them Viviani traces two different “veins” of this melodramatic sub-genre: those films with European settings in which the originally sinning mother descends to anonymity, and those films with American settings where the more “Rooseveltian” mother displays a greater energy and autonomy before descending to anonymity. Viviani suggests that King Vidor’s *Stella Dallas* is the “archetype” of this more energetic, American vein of maternal melodrama. He also adds that although Stella is not actually guilty of anything, her unwillingness to overcome completely her working class origins functions as a kind of original sin that makes her seem guilty in her husband’s and finally in her own eyes.  
 B. Ruby Rich and I have also briefly discussed the genre of these sacrificial maternal melodramas in our efforts to identify the context of Michelle Citron’s avant-garde feminist film, *Daughter Rite*. Citron’s film is in many ways the flip side to the maternal melodrama, articulating the daughter’s confused anger and love at the mother’s sacrificial stance. “The Right of Re-Vision: Michelle Citron’s *Daughter Rite*,” *Film Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (Fall 1981):17-22.
3. *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam, 1961), 488-89.
4. An excellent introduction to this rapidly growing area of study is Marianne Hirsch’s review essay, “Mothers and Daughters,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 1 (1981):200-22. See also Judith Kegan Gardiner, “On Female Identity and Writing by Women,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 347-61.
5. *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam, 1977), 240, 226.
6. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
7. Martha Vicinus, writing about the nineteenth century melodrama, suggests that melo-

- ma's "appropriate" endings offer "a temporary reconciliation of the irreconcilable." The concern is typically not with what is possible or actual but what is desirable. "Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth Century Domestic Melodrama," *New Literary History* 13, no. 1 (Autumn 1981):132. Peter Brooks emphasizes a similar quality of wish-fulfillment in melodrama, even arguing that psychoanalysis offers a systematic realization of the basic aesthetics of the genre: "If psychoanalysis has become the nearest modern equivalent of religion in that it is a vehicle for the cure of souls, melodrama is a way station toward this status, a first indication of how conflict, enactment, and cure must be conceived in a secularized world" (202).
8. Most prominent among these are Claire Johnston's "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema" in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, BFI Pamphlet (September 1972); and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.
  9. The list of feminist work on this film is impressive. It includes: Pam Cook, "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), 68-82; Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 175-80; Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 28-35; Joyce Nelson, "*Mildred Pierce* Reconsidered," *Film Reader* 2 (January 1977): 65-70; and Janet Walker, "Feminist Critical Practice: Female Discourse in *Mildred Pierce*," *Film Reader* 5(1982): 164-71.
  10. Molly Haskell only gave the film brief mention in her chapter on "The Woman's Film," *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 153-88. Since then the film has been discussed by Christian Viviani (see note 2); Charles Affron in *Cinema and Sentiment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 74-76; Ben Brewster, "A Scene at the Movies," *Screen* 23, no. 2 (July-August 1982): 4-5; and E. Ann Kaplan, "Theories of Melodrama: A Feminist Perspective," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 1, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1983): 40-48. Kaplan also has a longer article on the film, "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*," *Heresies* 16 (1983): 81-85. Laura Mulvey also mentions the film briefly in her "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by 'Duel in the Sun' (King Vidor, 1946)," *Framework* 15/16/17 (Summer 1981): 12-15—but only in the context of Vidor's much more male-oriented western. Thus, although *Stella Dallas* keeps coming up in the context of discussions of melodrama, sentiment, motherhood, and female spectatorship, it has not been given the full scrutiny it deserves, except by Kaplan, many of whose arguments I challenge in the present work.
  11. Mulvey, 11. See also most of the essays in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: AFI Monograph Series, 1983).
  12. Claire Johnston, for example, writes, "Despite the enormous emphasis placed on women as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent." "Woman's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," *Notes on Woman's Cinema*, Screen Pamphlet 2, ed. Claire Johnston, 26.
  13. Christine Gledhill, "Developments in Feminist Film Criticism," *Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute Monograph Series, 1983), 31. Originally published in *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3, no. 4, (1978): 457-93.
  14. Mulvey, 7.
  15. Mulvey, 7, 18.
  16. The few feminists who have begun this difficult but important work are: Mary Ann



- Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, no. 3-4 (Sept.-Oct. 1982): 74-87; Gertrud Koch, "Why Women Go to the Movies," *Jump Cut* 27 (July 1982), trans. Marc Silberman: 51-53; Judith Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism," *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, 44-66; and Mulvey herself in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by 'Duel in the Sun' (King Vidor, 1946)," *Framework* 15/16/17 (Summer 1981): 12-15; B. Ruby Rich, in Michelle Citron et al., "Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics," *New German Critique* 13 (1978): 77-107; and Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982). Since I wrote this article, two important new books on women and film have appeared. Both take considerable account of the processes by which the female spectator identifies with screen images. They are: E. Ann Kaplan's *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (N.Y.: Metheun, 1983); and Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
17. Gledhill, 41.
  18. Gledhill, 37.
  19. Gledhill, 42.
  20. Gledhill, 44-45.
  21. Freud begins this shift in the 1925 essay, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes," *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (Hogarth Press, 1953-74), vol. XIX. He continues it in the 1931 essay "Female Sexuality," vol. XXI.
  22. Marianne Hirsch's review essay, "Mothers and Daughters," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 1, (Autumn 1981): 200-22, offers an excellent summary of the diverse strands of the continuing re-appraisal of the mother-daughter relation. Hirsch examines theories of this relation in Anglo-American neo-Freudian object relations psychology (Chodorow, Miller, Dinnerstein), in Jungian myth criticism, and in the French feminist theories developing out of structuralism, post-structuralism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. A recent study of how female connectedness affects female moral development is Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982).
  23. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 7.
  24. "Oedipal asymmetries" is Chodorow's term, 7.
  25. Chodorow, 178.
  26. Marianne Hirsch surveys the importance of this point in her review essay "Mothers and Daughters," 209. So, too, does Judith Kegan Gardiner in "On Female Identity and Writing by Women," *Critical Inquiry: Writing and Sexual Difference* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 347-61.
  27. Chodorow, 188.
  28. These others include: Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and the Human Malaise* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Jessie Bernard, *The Future of Motherhood* (New York: Dial Press, 1974); and Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).
  29. This is the real advance of Chodorow's theories over those of an earlier generation of feminist psychoanalysts. Karen Horney, for example, found it necessary, as both Juliet Mitchell and Jane Gallop point out, to resort to generalizing statements of women's essential, biologically determined nature, thus leaving no possibility for change. Horney, "On the Genesis of the Castration Complex in Women," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, V, 1924: 50-65.

30. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974.
31. Other French feminists involved in this "feminine writing" are Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, Julia Kristeva, and Michele Montrelay. A critical introduction to these writers can be found in Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of L'Ecriture feminine," and Helene Vivienne Wenzel's "The Text as Body/Politics: An Appreciation of Monique Wittig's Writings in Context," both in *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 247-87.
32. "Ce sex qui n'en est pas un," trans. Claudia Reeder, *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Mass. Press, 1980), 100-1.
33. Anglo-American feminists have thus been critical of the new french feminists for two different reasons: American feminists have criticized an essentialism that would seem to preclude change (see, for example, the essay by Jones referred to in note 31); British feminists have criticized their apparent failure to account for the way the female body is mediated by language (see, for example, Beverly Brown and Parveen Adams, "The Feminine Body and Feminist Politics," *m/f*, no. 3, (1979): 35-50).
34. Irigaray, 106-7.
35. Rich, *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 631-60.
36. Irigaray, 110.
37. Mary Ann Doane, "Womans' Stake: Filming the Female Body," *October* 17 (Summer 1981): 30.
38. Kristeva's work has been translated in two volumes: *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); and *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (New York: Horizon Books, 1977).
39. Alice Jardine, "Theories of the Feminine: Kristeva" *enclitic* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1980): 13.
40. Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," in *Desire in Language*, 237-70.
41. Jane Gallop, "The Phallic Mother: Freudian Analysis," in *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 113-31.
42. Ann Kaplan emphasises this "wrenching" of the filmic point of view away from Stella and towards the upper-class values and perspectives of Stephen and the townspeople. "The Case of the Missing Mother," 83.
43. Doane, "The Woman's Film: Possession and Address," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, 67-82.
44. The term—originally used by Joan Riviere—is employed in Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, no. 34 (Sept/Oct. 1982): 74-87.
45. Ann Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 83.
46. Ibid.
47. Molly Haskell notes this tendency of women audiences to come away with a memory of heroic revolt, rather than the defeat with which so many films end, in her pioneering study *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 31.
48. Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Opera: Notes on a Feminine Narrative Form," *Film Quarterly* 33, no. 1, (Fall 1979): 14. A longer version of this article can be found in Modleski's book *Living with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1982): 85-109.
49. Kaplan, "Theories of Melodrama," 46.
50. Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," 87.
51. Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by 'Duel in the Sun' (King Vidor, 1946)," 13.

52. Doane, 87.
53. Ruby Rich, in Michelle Citron et al., "Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics," *New German Critique* 13 (1978): 87. Although Rich goes on to suggest that this dialectic is an either/or choice—"to identify either with Marilyn Monroe or with the man behind me hitting the back of my seat with his knees"—I think the more proper sense of the word would be to construe it as a continuous conflict and tension that informs female viewing and which in many cases does not allow the choice of one or the other.
54. Ben Brewster has cited the many cinematic references of the original novel as an indication of just how effective as an appeal to reality the cinematic illusion has become. "A Scene at the Movies," *Screen* 23, no. 2 (July-Aug. 1983): 4-5.
55. Freud's theory is that the little boy believes in the maternal phallus even after he knows better because he has seen evidence that it does not exist has been characterized by Octave Manoni as a contradictory statement that both asserts and denies the mother's castration. In this "Je sais bien mais quand même" (I know very well but just the same), the "just the same" is the fetish disavowal. Manoni, *Clefs pour l'imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 9-30. Christian Metz later applied this fetishistic structure of disavowal to the institution of the cinema as the creator of believable fictions of perceptually real human beings who are nevertheless absent from the scene. Thus the cinema aims all of its technical prowess at the disavowal of the lack on which its "imaginary signifier" is based. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti, (Bloomington Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982), 69-76.
56. Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," 80-81.
57. Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," 1 *Movie* 25 (n.d.): 56.
58. Vicinus, 132.