JOYCE WIELAND, FEMINIST DOCUMENTARY, AND THE BODY OF THE WORK

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In Canada, Joyce Wieland is widely known as a feminist visionary who conjoined women's traditional domestic crafts (quilts, embroideries, knitting, and even cake-decorating) with nationalist propaganda in the first major exhibition of a living Canadian woman artist in Ottawa's National Gallery ("True Patriot Love", 1971). More recently she has become known as a painter of large figurative canvases, honoured by the first major retrospective of a living Canadian woman at the Art Gallery of Ontario (Spring, 1987). Internationally, she is known as an experimental filmmaker historically situated in the New York Structural film movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the spring of 1987, I completed a documentary film, *Artist on Fire: The Work of Joyce Wieland* (titled after a 1983 Wieland self-portrait in oil on canvas)¹ which addresses Wieland's work in all media: pencil drawings, pastels, water colours, cloth works, sculptures, earth works, assemblages, oil paintings, works in plastic, and films in 8mm., 16mm., and 35mm. Her thirty-year career as an innovative and always changing artist is surveyed not chronologically or biographically, but as a constellation of formal variations on Wieland's principal concerns: nationalist, environmentalist and feminist politics; visionary spirituality; feminine sexuality and subjectivity; and the continually transformative interrogation of modes of representation.

This article addresses some of the theoretical concerns and formal strategies of that documentary, emphasizing the work which remains my principal interest, Wieland's experimental and narrative films. First, a few

remarks on the origins of the documentary and on the history of Wieland's film work. In 1983 I was teaching a course on avant-garde cinema which included the short films of Wieland from the late 60s and early 70s. In 'preparing for that class I found very little critical work on her films. She was mentioned whenever the topic of structural cinema was addressed (in P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*² and elsewhere) but she usually appeared only in a list of the seminal filmmakers of that movement, along with Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits. Only one major article had been published on Wieland's film work, placing her firmly within the modernist parameters of structural or material cinema and suggesting the element of the feminine in Wieland's work (Lauren Rabinowitz's "The Development of Feminist Strategies in the Experimental Films of Joyce Wieland", which introduced the now well known "domestic altar thesis").³

In presenting Wieland's films to the class I was struck forcibly by the fact that those early films — Hand-Tinting, Solidarity, Rat Life and Diet in North America, Pierre Vallières, Sailboat, and Water Sark — were remarkably resistant to any narrow classification, and could not be contained in a cinematic moment that seemed from the perspective of the 1980s to belong largely to the past. Those films spoke, through their variety of formal strategies and subject matter, to concerns being articulated in the most current film theory. The richness of Wieland's work for contemporary audiences is now being tapped by Kass Banning, who uses semiotics, structuralism and psychoanalytic theory to argue that certain of Wieland's films are marked by a transgressive excess which identifies the site of the feminine in art.⁴ And in a previous article, I attempted to demonstrate that Water Sark, a film made in 1964, could be usefully analyzed as an anticipation of many of the issues now discussed under the rubric of l'écriture feminine.5 In this work I see not a schematic overlaying of au courant critical theory onto cultural work from the past, but the valid task of contemporary criticism, exploring the still-pulsing lifeblood of art which reaches well beyond any supposed historical grave.

As of 1983, however, I think I can say that for Wieland, her work in film was consigned to the past. She had suffered a series of profound disappointments. After the critical successes of her early films in the structural mode (*Water Sark*, *Hand-Tinting*, *Sailboat*, *1933*, *Dripping Water*) she had been "lambasted" (as she put it) for daring to combine experimental techniques with comic narrative in *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1968), an allegory about draft resisters (played by pet gerbils) who escape from the United States to take up organic gardening in Canada. The film is now seen as combining Wieland's characteristic humour, politics, domestic setting and the innovative strategies of the "tabletop films" (made single-handedly on her kitchen table) with textual engagement in the form of subtitles and intertitles. (The use of subtitles and intertitles alternates between the informational and the abstract.) But at the time, the film was

received by the formal purists (as Wieland recounts) as a departure from the concerns of material cinema in its use of allegorical narrative. And it was viewed by the politically concerned as a trivialization of resistance to the Vietnam war.

Wieland returned to abstraction in Reason Over Passion (1969), a featurelength avant-garde film which brackets a section of treated and rephotographed footage of Pierre Eliot Trudeau at the 1968 Liberal convention with a series of hand-held tracking shots of the Canadian landscape from coast to coast, punctuated throughout by electronic beeps on the soundtrack and overlaid with multiple anagrams of the words 'reason over passion' (Trudeau's famous phrase) as superimposed subtitles. Reason Over Passion, now considered a classic of Canadian experimental cinema, was also disappointingly received. Wieland recalls that the New York avant-garde establishment more or less advised her to return to short pieces rather than to attempt to compete with the major figures of the structural film movement who were by then producing feature-length avant-garde works.⁶ And when the principal critic and promoter of the avant-garde in New York, Jonas Mekas, founded the Anthology Film Archives as a repository for "monuments of cinematic art", Wieland's work was not invited into the collection.7

Perhaps her greatest disappointment, however, had been the reception of The Far Shore (1975-76). Only the third woman filmmaker in English Canada to produce a dramatic feature film (after Nell Shipman's Back to God's Country in 1919 and Sylvia Spring's Madeleine Is ... in 1969), Wieland embarked on a large-budget period production in 35mm. to realize her dream of combining a story of Canadian art with nationalist and environmentalist politics. Based loosely on the tragedy of Tom Thomson, the quintessential painter of the Canadian landscape who had mysteriously disappeared in the northern wilderness at the peak of his career. The Far Shore situates itself in the historical period of the 1920s. Although the film is not silent, it employs melodramatic techniques of characterization and narrative common to D.W. Griffith and Jean Vigo, centering on a tale of aesthetic aspiration, cross-cultural conflict, and forbidden and doomed love. Rabinowitz analyzes the film as an exploration of parodic reversals of genre elements.8 Thus a revisionary history could situate The Far Shore as a prophetic instance of the concern with the semiosis of genre which has come to mark filmmakers as diverse as Chantal Akerman (in her musical The Golden Eighties 1985), Rainer Werner Fassbinder (in his many reworkings of Sirkian melodrama), Kathleen Bigelow (The Loveless, 1982 and Near Dark 1987), Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen (The Bad Sister, 1984) Wim Wenders (Hammett), Bette Gordon (Variety), Lawrence Kasdan (Body Heat), and Neil Jordan (Mona Lisa). The Far Shore was however again rejected by the avant-garde community for its commitment to sentiment, genre and narrative, and it failed miserably at the box office in Canada as it was laughed off the screen by the very audience Wieland hoped to reach.

Although she had produced a body of sixteen films in a stunning variety of modes, this series of disappointments resulted in Wieland's turning away from film work in any format. Fortunately, the turn was not permanent. In the winter of 1983 I renewed contact with Wieland, writing her a note expressing my excitement over the contemporary vitality of her films, and offering to help in any way with a return to that work. Wieland needed little more than encouragement and money to prompt a new interest in the medium which had been as intimate and personal for her as pencil and paper. The results have appeared over the last four years: the final 'publication' of works which had languished in a metaphorical drawer for 20 years, *Patriotism II*, and *Peggy's Blue Skylight*, and the post-production to completion of works that had been shot earlier but never edited, *Birds at Sunrise*, and *A and B in Ontario*. She now has in progress *Wendy and Joyce*, again from 'archival' footage. Happy ending.

The winter of 1983 marked the beginning of my interest in making a documentary about Wieland, a film which would not only indicate the wealth of her film production, but would place the films in the context of her work in all other media as well.

There were a number of issues that had to be considered in the planning of the film. In terms of documentary treatment of the subject, it was plain to me from the outset that I would deal exclusively with Wieland's cultural production, leaving biographical elements aside, despite Wieland's clear interest not only in her own subjectivity but in her personal and family history as well. In terms of feminist theory, this was a somewhat controversial decision. For Lauren Rabinowitz, among others, the placing of women artists as social subjects in relation to dominant discourses necessitates a consideration of personal biography, for a constant in the history of women artists is their marginalization from and oppression within those discourses.9 Thus for example the corpus of work from many women artists is smaller, more intermittent and more materially inhibited in its production than that of their male counterparts, for women artists partake of the general poverty of women which limits their access to materials and the market, as well as to the famous room of their own or separate studio. They are affected as well by the traditional social and domestic obligations of women towards children and family which limit not only the time they may spend on cultural production but often the scope and nature of the subjects they tend to deal with and, as a corollary, the degree of seriousness with which their work may be critically received. They are also affected by the general discrimination against women in important collections (for Wieland, the Anthology Film Archives decision is a case in point) leading to their invisibility in cultural history. Thus for Rabinowitz, personal biography has tangible material ramifications for women artists, and such information is crucial to the accurate representation of a new cultural knowledge which includes women as active subjects.

My decision that the documentary should deal only with Wieland's work and leave aside biographical details was taken not to repudiate such concerns, nor even simply to supplant the prevalent imaging of "woman artist as victim" which, it has been argued, serves also to perpetuate that condition by discouraging younger women from choosing cultural production as an option. Nor did it stem from the absence in Wieland's personal history of those conditions. In many ways the evidence of Wieland's work and life argues to the contrary, for as a woman artist she was blessed by the early acceptance of her work especially in cloth, the relative material comfort of a life which was free of children and allowed her a studio of her own, the freedom to work in costly materials including large oil canvases and even 35mm. film, and almost more important, the example of women artists and teachers who had preceded her. However in other ways she was deeply affected by the traditional constraints on women artists: the media treatment of her as an "artist's wife" (she was married to Michael Snow), the dismissal of the domestic subject matter of much of her work. the lack of serious critical appraisal, the marginalization of her creative production as "women's art", and so on¹⁰ — not to mention her Dickensian childhood as an impoverished orphan.

My choosing to focus only on Wieland's work is related more firmly to current rethinking of the feminist project. Recently, in a remarkable resurrection of the old slogan "the personal is political", Teresa de Lauretis has reminded us of an essential notion of feminist work: the direct relation between sociality and subjectivity, or "self-consciousness" as a specific mode of knowledge that is the political apprehension of self in reality.11 De Lauretis suggests that a major contribution of feminist work to the production of knowledge is a shift in the notion of identity. Feminist theory has embraced not the conception of the subject as the fragmented, flickering posthumanist subject constructed in division by language, the "I" continuously preempted in an unchangeable symbolic order, but rather a concept of a multiple, shifting, self-contradictory identity, a subject not divided in but at odds with language. 12 Although the concept of the subject which is muted, ellided or unrepresentable in dominant discourses still pertains, the new understanding is of an identity which one decides to reclaim and insists upon as a strategy. It is this emerging conception of a gendered and heteronomous subject that is initially defined by the consciousness of oppression that de Lauretis sees as an instance of an epistemological shift effected by feminism, a new way of thinking about culture as well as about knowledge itself. In feminist work, which addresses woman as social subject and engenders the subject as political, in the definition of self as political — in terms of the politics of everyday life which then enters the public sphere — we find a displacement of aesthetic hierarchies and generic categories which thus establishes the semiotic ground for a different production of reference and meaning.¹³

De Lauretis thus effects a synthesis of tendencies in feminist film culture which, particularly in accounts from the 1970s, had been seen as a dichotomy. Both Silvia Bovenschen and Laura Mulvey have remarked on two separate concerns of the women's movement and two types of film work.¹⁴ One is the documentary for purposes of political activism usually connected with consciousness-raising strategies and the search for positive images of women, and the other is the formal work on the medium which seeks to analyze and disengage ideological codes of representation. Bovenschen characterized this dichotomy as an "opposition between feminist demands and artistic production", and Mulvey saw them as two successive moments of feminist film culture, with the first period marked by the effort to change the content of cinematic representation and the second by the "fascination with the cinematic process" or the concern with the language of representation. But for de Lauretis, both questions of identification or self-definition and of the modes of envisaging ourselves as subjects are fundamental and inextricably bound-together questions for feminist theory and cultural production.¹⁵

In feminist cultural production, the rewriting of culture has often taken the form of an emphasis on women's enforced silence, their unspeakability, their marginalization from dominant discourses, and the necessity for speaking of and from that silence, thus inscribing into the picture of reality characters and events that were previously invisible, untold, unspoken. It was to be the contention of Artist on Fire that Wieland had been an exemplary instance of the insertion of the feminine into cultural discourse, not only through her early work in plastic and cloth and the tabletop films, but in the continuing themes of her work in all media over thirty years: the connections she drew between the earth, ecology, Canada as a nation, and the condition and potential of woman; and the eroticization of landscape, inter — and cross-species relationships, and the feminine body. Her insistence on the personal, intimate, and feminine not only bespeaks an identification of feminine discourse as emanating from the gender-specific separation of women from language, but the plurality of the modes of representation found in her work suggests a continual interrogation and transformation of conventional cultural discourses.

In the formal strategies she employs Wieland has continually reworked the materials of art. Her transformational work with women's traditional domestic crafts in the early quilts and embroideries must be read as an implicit assertion of the necessity of revising conventional definitions of appropriate forms, subjects, and materials for art. And her work in all media is characterized by a sensual hands-on personalism which has recently been seen as exceeding the terms of the modernist canon.

The short film *Hand-Tinting* is an excellent example. A closely edited piece composed of out-takes from an aborted industrial documentary, the film displays many of the characteristics of the structural cinema, which investigated the physical properties of film itself as a flat material utilizing

light, projection, printing procedures and the illusion of movement. Such films emphasized the tensions among the physical materials, the spectator's perceptual processes, and the emotional or pictorial realities cinema has traditionally represented. 16 In Hand-Tinting Wieland reprinted sequences in negative, and employed repetition and looping of images, interspersed with black leader. The incomplete movements and gestures become isolated, lacking spatial depth and temporal completion, and thus negating the illusion of solid space created in realist cinema. 17 But Wieland goes further, for unlike the modernist austerity of the radical experiments of Michael Snow (to cite just one example), the film is characterized by Wieland's concern with women's positions as social subjects and the disasters of political power and domination. Rather than the "arbitrary" or "meaningless" images of many of the structural films (e.g. Snow's *Thirty* Seconds in Montreal or Tony Conrad's Flicker Film). Wieland selects images of disenfranchised black women which, under her treatment, construct a pre-semiotic examination of social rituals as pure rhythm and deconstruct facial and bodily signs of oppression and resistance. Finally, she imposes over all her personal domestic stamp, bathing the black and white footage in tubs of dye and piercing the celluloid with a sewing needle. The film glows with vivid colour and literally sparkles as the light strikes through the holes in the emulsion, effecting a visceral sensuality that partakes of the erotic. Kass Banning argues that in Hand-Tinting the formal demarcation of space is marked by gender division and that the film provides a site for a feminine imaginary, an unattainable excess. 18

Wieland uses women's bodies and especially her own body not only as subject but as material for art. In the lithograph "Facing North", for example, she imprints her own facial skin onto the paper and places her lip print (with a special pigmented lipstick) in the appropriate position. The piece bears the mark of her body as well in the fingerprints which attest to the procedure of producing the facial print (the balance and hold of the arms and body in relation to the paper). Her own corporeality as both subject of the piece and process of production is thus immediately apparent.

In Reason Over Passion, there is a sequence in which Wieland films her own reflection in a mirror as she silently mouths the words to "O Canada". The image includes the bottom portion of her face and the top of the hand-held camera, containing again the traces of her body both as content and process. Kass Banning argues additionally that through its frantic and varied camera movement, its parodic reversals and repetitions, and its play upon language, meaning and silence, Reason Over Passion suggests "what cannot be represented: the rhythmic, vertiginous sensory experience which exceeds language and the propriety of the distinctions between the body and the environment, the body and meaning". And in its feminization of technology, it reverses traditional conceptions of tech-

ne as male and *physis* as female. It dissolves the distinctions between body and landscape, technology and nature.²⁰

Water Sark is marked throughout by Wieland's body. Her hand enters the frame to manipulate objects. Movement and manipulation dynamizes everything. Images are shot through a glass of water so that colours are blurred and shapes distorted. Water is poured into the frame to further disturb the image. The hand-held camera moves in and out and around the elements which are in turn moved, jiggled, tipped, and variously disturbed. A mirror moves at various speeds and angles to reflect or refract light. The filmic elements of light, colour, shape and movement are manipulated in a moment of ecstatic vision in which all the senses concatenate. It becomes virtually impossible to tell the limits of the movement of the objects, reflecting and refracting surfaces, and camera. As the kinaesthetic motion of the sequence reaches ecstacy, the sense of Wieland's corporeal presence is overwhelming. She films her reflection in mirrors holding the camera in one hand and a magnifying glass or distorting lens in the other, enlarging her winking eve or contorting her mouth in one hilarious sequence, and examining her exposed breast and nipple in a sequence that combines almost scientific contemplation with the expression of an erotic pleasure curiously without narcissism. Throughout, the film effects a sensual, poetic, and lighthearted spontaneity, with digressions and detours involving a toy boat, her cat, rubber gloves, and a transparent plastic veil. All of it is connected centrally to Wieland's own body, released from contemplation into ecstatic play.

Much of Wieland's work is marked by such elements: spontaneity, playfulness, sensuality, joyful discovery, the language of unconscious processes, and the traces of her own body as both image content and process of production. My delight in this work is a response not only to such characteristics, but to the respectful sense that her working methods are completely different from my own, which generally bear the marks of more consciously theoretical considerations. The exciting task of *Artist on Fire* was not only to engage with Wieland's work without succumbing to imitation, but to effect an interweaving of two opposite styles without producing one as comment upon the other.

As for the formal strategy employed in my work on Wieland's work I will address only one principal consideration here, and that is the one identified by de Lauretis as crucial for feminist work in general²¹ and by both Bill Nichols and Tom Waugh as central to considerations of documentary: the question of address.²²

In previous films I had attempted to explore the issue of feminine subjectivity and identification through specific treatment of the voice. From Duras' inspirational work on the articulation of a sonorous space of feminine subjectivity in *India Song* through Mulvey-Wollen's considerations of voice, language and address in *Riddles of the Sphinx*, and Patricia Gruben's multiple deployment of the codes of voice-over, direct address,

and realist synchronized sound in Sifted Evidence, the use of multiple voices in feminist cinema has spoken from and to the excessive interiority of the maternal voice and its prototypical relation to voice-over narration in cinema. In Speak Body (1979) I began to work with this concept in a film which was clearly influenced as well by Joyce Wieland's avant-garde political films such as Solidarity. Hoping to achieve something like her combination of minimalist formal strategies with a political motive and content, I worked with constructed images and a political subject, abortion, which in feminist cinema had been largely consigned to the documentary mode. In that film I used a combination of scripted and unscripted/spontaneous/"documentary" female voices cut into a fragmented, multiple and contradictory voice-over which I hoped would not only challenge the masculine voice of authority that tends to characterize the use of voice-over in documentary cinema, but would also speak from and to feminine subjectivity in a film which deals with female experience and the perception and representation of the female body. The attempt was clearly more than simply to address a female spectatorship, but to position the spectator in a necessary identification with feminine subjectivity.

Striptease (1980) and Storytelling (1983) both employed variations around a similar use of the voice. In all three of these films, the use of many varieties of language, voice, and discourse was intended to effect a means of identification which would function in a way that was different from the conventional cinematic means of identification and communication. In Striptease the predominant variation was the resurrection of the good old talking head in combination with the fragmented and contradictory use of multiple voice-overs, in an attempt to combine an emphasis on female subjectivity with an empowering opportunity to speak, to engage directly with the spectator — for women who in their profession as strippers were the paradigmatically silent objects of the mastering male gaze. In Storytelling the voice-over disappeared altogether as I was trying to effect a collapse of the emphasis on multiplicity, contradiction, and interiority into direct address to the camera. Hoping to produce an interrogation of the conventional distinction between women as bearers and men as makers of culture, the film addresses the traditional function of the maternal voice as teller of stories, both bearer and producer of meaning.

In Artist on Fire once again the emphasis is on a direct engagement of the look and listen of the spectator, as the central structuring devices of the film are the direct address of the artist to camera/audience and the multiple, fragmented and unscripted voice-overs which combine various discourses: personal, academic, descriptive, analytical, and something approaching the poetic. In contrast to Wieland's voice, which is mixed clearly, completes sentences, speaks alone, and is corporealized (synchronized to her lip movements on screen), the unidentified, disembodied and inter-cut voice-overs are treated with an hallucinatory reverb and embedded in multiple tracks including sounds from Wieland's films, ad-

ditional sound effects, and music. The intended effect is of contrasting modes of address, identification, and subjectivity.

De Lauretis sums up her discussion of women's cinema with the assertion that the gender-specific division of women in language, the distance from official culture, the urge to imagine new forms of community and new images, as well as the consciousness of the subjective factor in all forms of work are themes which articulate the relation of subjective meaning and experience which en-genders the social subject as female. These issues are formally explored in women's cinema through the disjunction of image and voice, the reworking of narrative and narrated space, and the strategies of address that alter the forms and balance of traditional representation, either through the inscription of subjective space within the frame or through the construction of other discursive social spaces.²³ I do not intend to make claims about the success or failure of *Artist on Fire*, but certainly I would say that the intentions of the formal strategies of the film are consistent with de Lauretis' analysis.

As an endnote, let me add that the prevailing feminist theoretical discussion, de Lauretis and Silverman included, has, while asserting the originating function of documentary in feminist cinema and acknowledging its continuing role, nevertheless persists in defining and re-visioning almost exclusively in terms of dramatic fiction (however oppositionally constructed) and avant-garde cinema. My continued work in documentary is a strategic effort to reinsert the documentary mode into that discussion.

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Notes

- Available in Canada from Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre 67A Portland Street, Toronto, Ontario M5V 2M9 — and in the United States from Women Make Movies — Suite 211, 225 Lafayette Street, New York, New York 10012.
- 2. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- 3. Film Reader no. 5, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1982.
- "Textual Excess in Joyce Wieland's Hand-Tinting", CineAction!, Spring 1986; and "Reason Over Passion" Unpublished Paper, Art Gallery of Ontario, April 1987).
- "The Feminine Body Joyce Wieland's Water Sark" in Dialogue, ed. Pierre Veronneau, Michael Dorland & Seth Feldman (Montreal: Mediatexte Publications Inc., 1986).
- 6. Rabinowitz, 1987, 167.
- For critical accounts of that rejection, see Kass Banning, "From Didactics to Desire", Work in Progress: Building Feminist Culture, ed. Rhea Tregebov, Toronto: The Women's Press, 1987, 157; and Rabinowitz, 1987, 189.
- 8. Rabinowitz, 1987, 171-179.
- 9. Unpublished Paper, Art Gallery of Ontario, April 1987.

- Outlined with appropriate invective in Kass Banning, "The Mummification of Mummy: Joyce Wieland as the AGO's First Living Other", C Magazine no. 13, Spring 1987.
- 11. "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts", Feminist Studies/Critical Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 8.
- 12. de Lauretis, p. 9.
- 13. de Lauretis, p. 10.
- Bovenschen, "Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?", trans. Beth Weckmueller, New German Critique, no. 12, Winter 1977; Mulvey, "Feminism, Film and the Avant-Garde", Framework no. 10, Spring 1979.
- 15. "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema", *New German Critique* #34, Winter 1985, 155; also published in de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- 16. Rabinowitz, 1987, 120.
- 17. Rabinowitz, 1987, 161.
- 18. Banning, 1987, 159.
- 19. Banning, 1987, 161.
- 20. Banning, 1987, 159-161.
- 21. de Lauretis, 1985.
- 22. Nichols, "Documentary Theory and Practice", Screen vol. 17 no. 4, Winter 1976-77; also published as "The Documentary Film and Principles of Exposition" in Nichols' Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); and Waugh, "Acting to Play Onself: Notes on Performance in Documentary", Film Acting and Performance, ed. Carole Zucker (Montreal: Scarecrow Press), 1988.

Kaja Silverman also takes up the issues of authorial voice and spectatorial address in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

23. de Lauretis, 1985, 174-5.