
Voicing Dissonance

Resistant Soundscapes in 1960s Feminist Experimental Film

ABSTRACT This article examines how sound was used as an effective tool of formal resistance in the work of influential feminist filmmakers, Carolee Schneemann (United States), Gunvor Nelson (Sweden), and Joyce Wieland (Canada). While their work differs in both aesthetic approach and thematics, their strategic use of sound as a point of disruption within their early films set an important standard for future feminist experimental film practice. The article outlines how each filmmaker constructed a dialectical relationship between image and sound that often challenged viewers. Each produced defamiliarized landscapes out of domestic spaces commonly overcoded by gendered systems of representation, including the kitchen, the home, and the garden. Furthermore, each film offered alternative forms for articulating women's subjectivity that challenged the roles made available to them during the 1960s. Through close readings of Wieland's film *Water Sark* (1965), Schneemann's film *Plumb Line* (1968–71), and Nelson's film *My Name Is Oona* (1969), the article demonstrates how each artist advanced a critical politics through sound-image dissonance. **KEYWORDS** experimental film, Gunvor Nelson, 1960s, Carolee Schneemann, Joyce Wieland

SOUNDING AN AFFRONT TO 1960S CULTURAL FEMININITY

This essay examines the use of sound in the early work of feminist experimental filmmakers Joyce Wieland, Carolee Schneemann, and Gunvor Nelson. I am interested in the way that each filmmaker advanced her emergent feminist politics through an image-sound dialectic that sought to challenge spectators. Through their dissonant soundtracks, the artists successfully eschewed dominant forms of representation and modes of address. I explore these aesthetic challenges through close readings of three early works: Wieland's *Water Sark* (1965), Schneemann's *Plumb Line* (1968–71), and Nelson's *My Name Is Oona* (1969). Wieland's use of silence and discordant noise, Schneemann's use of archival reflections on a personal breakup, and Nelson's audio documentation of her daughter challenged cultural expectations of domesticity, heterosexual

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romance, and motherhood. They formally undercut and reimaged dominant dictums of the 1960s through asynchronous soundtracks that destabilized the image of women onscreen and the certainty of the spectator in the audience.

I situate these films as examples of what B. Ruby Rich calls a feminist avant-garde “cinema of reconstruction.”¹ Rich associates this term with feminist films of the 1970s and 1980s. However, I extend it to the work of Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson as it usefully frames their specific contributions to the development of an earlier feminist film language. For Rich, this cinema of reconstruction offers a “voice” to address “the truths, problems, and possibilities of our lives and psyches.”² This can be found in the ways that Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson voice their ambivalence toward the gendered values they were constrained by as both artists and women. Their work situates dissonant sounds in the highly gendered spaces of the kitchen, the home, and the garden. Their discordant soundtracks defamiliarize the domesticity of these private spaces and critically interrogate the domestic roles of wife, muse, and mother commonly associated with the spaces. I consider how this dissonance is constructed through formal strategies that vocalize the ambivalence held by the filmmakers toward their gendered worlds.

These readings of Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson address their critical marginalization within the history of avant-garde criticism.³ Critics, filmmakers, and supporters of the New American cinema movement throughout the 1960s adhered to modernist aesthetic principles that delineated “masterworks,” which fostered the spirit of the “New Man” in art.⁴ This often led to the exclusion of artists such as Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson, as their work did not easily fit within existing critical categories.⁵ While this marginalization has been well documented over the past forty-plus years in feminist film scholarship,⁶ the effects of feminist filmmakers’ critical reception on their historical legacy cannot be overstated. Their work received less critical attention than did that of male filmmakers, and what critical attention they did receive focused on them as women rather than as artists. Their personalities were scrutinized, relationships publicized, and bodies and personal style described over and above their films.⁷ In this way, they were discursively constructed as phenomena rather than as artists.⁸ Gendered terms such as *childlike*, *simplistic*, *emotional*, and *diaristic* are often found in early critical writings on Wieland, Nelson, Schneemann, and others, which resulted in their absence from the institutional history of American avant-garde cinema, and in less support for the archiving and preservation of their films.⁹

Much work has been done in the last several decades to counter this legacy of marginalization.¹⁰ I extend this rich conversation on feminist experimental film in contemporary scholarship by providing a sustained focus on the critical use of soundtracks as points of resistance in the work of Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson. I specifically address their use of disembodied voices and soundscapes to create alternative representations of women's subjective experiences. I am interested in how these soundscapes encourage critical intersubjective relations among spectator, filmmaker, and onscreen image. Through the use of discordant "voices" in filmic space, they put what was unrepresentable (woman's subjectivity *and* her ambivalences) into the audiovisual fray.¹¹ While I focus here on how Wieland's, Schneemann's, and Nelson's oeuvres are notable for their formal interventions into domestic roles and spaces via discordant sound-image relations, there is a broader trajectory of such work in the early history of feminist experimental film. A more expanded analysis could include films such as Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), Marie Menken's *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957), Yvonne Rainer's *Film about a Woman Who . . .* (1974), Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), Patricia Gruben's *The Central Character* (1977), Kay Armatage's *Speakbody* (1979), Marjorie Keller's *Misconception* (1977) and *Daughters of Chaos* (1980), and Brenda Longfellow's *Our Marilyn* (1987), to name only a few. I focus specifically in this essay on *Water Sark*, *Plumb Line*, and *My Name Is Oona*, as critical attention to their use of sound as a counterpoint to the constraints of gendered, domestic space has been largely overlooked. Together they offer a compelling case as to why such formal and thematic constellations should be given broader consideration.

Kaja Silverman's writing on the feminist use of voice in *The Acoustic Mirror* is useful for understanding how Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson use dissonant soundscapes to alter both filmic space and the image of woman onscreen. Silverman notes that women's voice can signify both constraint and resistance, depending how it is used. The disembodied voice has a unique function for feminist filmmakers because of women's traditional construction as merely bodies, objects, or images. There are few disembodied female voices in classical Hollywood because they are ultimately inaccessible to the male gaze. For Silverman, the disembodied voice is a site for "dissonance and dislocation," as it blurs the "distinction between diegetic interiority and exteriority," redefining "the relationship between spectator and spectacle."¹² As such, women's disembodied voice functions as both a formal element within the audioscape and more metaphorically as a vehicle for articulating women's subjectivity. Silverman situates this

voice at the crucial threshold between body, language, and the social.¹³ This is precisely the nexus that Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson interrogate through their use of dissonant sound. Each aims to vocalize a more critical relationship among onscreen bodies, cinematic language, and socialized gender roles. In conversation with their own bodies (or, in Nelson's case, with that of her daughter), the filmmakers employ disembodied voices and nondiegetic sound to complicate the rigid positioning of women onscreen. This constellation provides space in which a more complex representation of women's subjectivity to emerge.

Building on Silverman, I read the disembodied voice as both a formal disruption and a metaphor for alternative subjectivities in my analysis of *Water Sark*, *Plumb Line*, and *My Name Is Oona*. Like Silverman, I locate one manifestation of this formal disruption in recorded voices in dialogue with images onscreen. However, in these films, such disruptions are also present in the dissonant sounds that "voice" the articulations of the filmmaker. This echoes Britta Sjogren's definition of the term *voice-off* as any nonsynchronized voices that function as "a strongly heterogeneous formal element" in constructing "the film text along with the image."¹⁴ For Sjogren, such purposeful uses of sound exist as a "parallel process" to the image and are equally powerful in "structuring the meanings available to the spectator of a film."¹⁵ I extend this definition of the voice-off to include the formal voicing of the artist's intentions within the *mise en scène*. The reflexively mediated images-soundscapes that Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson construct are an integral means by which they speak their discontents. They are an intersubjective form of address that each engages with through different forms, including silence, linguistic noncoherence, and repetition. In *Water Sark*, Wieland films herself mouthing utterances that we cannot hear; in *Plumb Line*, Schneemann includes a rambling recording of an emotional collapse; and in *My Name Is Oona*, Nelson's daughter states her name in a looping repetition for the film's entirety. These voices work in conjunction with the autobiographical themes, intimately known bodies, and reflexive camerawork present in each film. Together the image-sound relations advance the filmmakers' voicing of a personally situated form of politics for the viewer.

These utterances gesture toward Rich's notion of a cinema of reconstruction that creates a feminist syntax. Mary Ann Doane best addresses the need for this syntax when she argues that "since patriarchy has always already said everything (everything and nothing) about woman, efforts to give those phrases a different intonation, to mumble, stutter, to slur them, to articulate them differently must be doomed to failure."¹⁶ There is nothing at stake in women's self-representation: because of their exclusion from (cinematic and other) language, they have

nothing to lose.¹⁷ In light of this, Doane argues the need to articulate woman “differently” in cinema, which includes a mumbling, stuttering, and slurring of dominant language.¹⁸ Doane’s support of a critical feminist voice that disrupts women’s place in cinema articulates what is so valuable about pioneering efforts by experimental filmmakers such as Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson. Doane’s observations suggest how failure can become a formally productive alternative to dominant practices of representation. To mumble, stutter, and slur places the speaker in the domain of discordance—language becomes excessive, unproductive, and uncontainable. These acts of refusal suggest incoherence as a feminist act of noncompliance, which echoes Sjogren’s call to pay close attention to the “‘other side’ of the voice: its grain, its difference, its *non*-sense.”¹⁹ The films I consider “voice” this non-sense through the mumble, stutter, and slur in a variety of formal ways. They are an important element of the soundtracks presented by Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson as they utilize noncompliance to undermine the dominant representational and cultural paradigms they were situated within. Their use of dissonant sound to undermine 1960s femininity is where their specific cinema reconstruction makes its most pointed intervention. In what follows, I address how each filmmaker voices her critical noncompliance through formal experimentations with sound that ultimately advance alternative subjectivities for women onscreen and open up more intersubjective cinema-spectator relations.

SILENCE AS NONCOMPLIANCE IN *WATER SARK*

Joyce Wieland’s film *Water Sark* (1965; figs. 1, 2) is a “performative self-portrait” commenting ironically on the domestic setting of the kitchen.²⁰ The film explores an array of everyday objects and Wieland’s body within the confines of her kitchen table.²¹ The images are distorted, framed by broken mirror fragments, magnifying glasses, and the reflective surface of water in various glasses and bowls. The mechanical processes and props required to create these distortions are simultaneously shown within the frame. Wieland reveals the usually absent body hidden behind the camera as a central subject of the film by framing herself in the mirrors and reflective surfaces throughout the room.²² These reflections counter the invisible processes of filming by revealing the camera onscreen, albeit in a fragmented form. The soundscape is composed of abstract and equally distorted sounds. The dominant sound throughout is the high-pitched whine and stutter of a violin string or flute that resembles the whistle of an unattended kettle on the stove.²³ This sound is interspersed with the clanging of metal objects and their tinny echoes, street noises, distant traffic, and the dripping of



FIGURE 1. *Water Sark* (1965, dir. Joyce Wieland). (Courtesy of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre.)



FIGURE 2. *Water Sark*. (Courtesy of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre.)

water at various intensities. These sounds are rhythmic but unsettling, familiar but ungraspable. They do not merge with the filmed objects in any satisfactory way, but rather add an element of disruption to the viewing experience. The film's emphasis on the materiality of cinematic time and space, tied to a wholly dissonant soundscape, force a hyperreflexive presentation of sound and image for audience contemplation.

For Wieland, the film is a metacommentary on filmmaking: "The whole film is about me making the film."²⁴ We can read it, then, as a vehicle for Wieland to give voice to her lived experiences of her domestic space. As Paul Arthur notes, Wieland's aesthetic engagement with the domestic sphere "never quite banishes an underlying ambivalence, constructing domestic life as at once imaginatively liberating and entrapping."²⁵ This ambivalence speaks clearly to Silverman's position that woman's voice functions as a signifier of subjectivity emerging specifically from the spatial conditions of the text.²⁶ The kitchen is a familiar space that Wieland destabilizes through the film's composition and sound design. The dominant sound of a shrill, unattended kettle whistle makes this ambivalence abundantly clear. The kitchen is not a site of perfection; it is a site of missed cues and distraction. The tedious nature of the high-pitched sound defamiliarizes the associated "comfort" of domestic space while asking us to stay (watching and listening) anyway. In this way, Wieland successfully transforms the overwrought site of the domestic setting into a space of tension and creative play, giving voice to her subjective relationship to the space. The film explores the kitchen as a potentially surreal, interior, and *other* space, challenging the view of domestic space as only a site of constraint. *Water Sark* offers an exploratory vision, one that is curious and experiments with both the quotidian objects found in Wieland's home (toy boats, water glasses, teapots, and flower arrangements), the material conditions of cinema, and the filmmaker's body alongside the grating and alienating-yet-familiar sounds derived from objects in the domestic setting. In doing so, Wieland forces a dialectic relationship among the images, her space, her authorship, and the spectator. Sound here functions as a means to "sustain difference . . . to express contradiction, to signify *between* male and female."²⁷ Wieland purposefully explores the kitchen as a woman's space and employs dissonant, nonsynchronous sounds as a means to affectively get at the contradictions inherent in reading the space as such.

Water Sark equally advances its feminist critique through the simultaneous articulation and disruption of Wieland herself as an onscreen image. The film is an excellent example of Doane's call to articulate women's bodies differently. Throughout, Wieland's fragmented framing of her body disrupts the traditional

roles of mother or muse available to women onscreen. Hers is an absurdist, nonproductive, distorted body that cannot be fully grasped. In the final minutes of the film, Wieland frames her eye and lips with a magnifying glass while filming herself in a mirror shard. Her face is framed in close-up, with the camera fixed to one eye and the magnifying glass to the other. The magnifying glass moves to Wieland's mouth, which she proceeds to open and close, mouthing unheard words including "fuck off, shit, shit" before sticking her tongue out from behind the magnifying glass's frame.²⁸ The sequence enacts a curious refusal: despite the promise of articulation, the silent lips prohibit the speaker from being heard. The tension evoked here between speaking and silence reflects a "heterogeneity" that is "sustained . . . not by obliterating difference, but in accounting for the existence of contradiction."²⁹ Like Sjogren's voice-off, the silent gestures of Wieland's mouth "elucidate the dynamic presence of sustained contradictions that shape the films."³⁰ Neither compliant with nor entirely outside of larger representational systems, Wieland seeks a negotiation—a silent, troubling dialogue from within the cinematic frame. Furthermore, the erratic framing of her mouth destabilizes the presumption that the magnifying glass can both inspect and "know" the object framed by its gaze. We cannot hear what Wieland is mouthing despite the "objective" potential of both the magnifying glass and the film camera. As such, we will never fully know Wieland or what she speaks, indicating the impossibilities of "knowing woman" through visual technologies. This act of articulation employs Wieland's fragmented embodiment and verbal noncompliance as a formal strategy. Like the film's setting and distortion of everyday objects and sounds, Wieland purposefully throws into question the modernist valuing of authorial detachment by asserting herself as an author onscreen. Importantly, she is not a heroic author but a partial, fragmented, unreliable author who does not directly speak to us. Thus she provides a productive critique of the experience of women filmmakers struggling to be seen and heard at all as authors in the 1960s.

VOICING AUTHORSHIP AND DESPAIR IN *PLUMB LINE*

The film *Plumb Line* is the second film in Carolee Schneemann's influential *Autobiographical Trilogy*. Made between 1968 and 1971, it confronts the painful dissolution of a failed romantic relationship. *Plumb Line* is striking for its outright refusal, similar to *Water Sark's*, to provide clarity—either through a coherent narrative, soundscape, or film image. The film is composed of multiple layers of dissonant images, sounds, and tempos. It includes photographs and 8mm and

16mm film sequences of Schneemann and her lover—both alone and together—as well as shots of buildings, plazas, beaches, roadways, and other images edited into densely collaged film frames. These repeated images are reprinted on high-contrast film stock, with saturated color filters giving them a mediated, textured quality. They are presented in quadrants within the frame, and the images career toward each other before splitting apart. An equally dense soundtrack of sirens, psychedelic rock, a cat meowing, unidentified moaning, and a recording of Schneemann's voice accompany the images. As in *Water Sark*, the formal properties of *Plumb Line* successfully interrogate the traditional representation of women in film. Viewers are met with a raw, visceral, forceful film style, which opens the possibility for the artist's depiction of herself onscreen to be more than a surface image of dominant cinema practices. There is no stability in this image or in the soundtrack, as both vacillate rapidly. The viewer is never able to fully grasp what is heard or seen onscreen. The image and score are broken down and then reconstituted over and over in order to incorporate greater complexity into Schneemann's explorations of herself as a subject of inquiry.

In one striking scene, a siren erupts atop images of Schneemann and the man kissing. The pairing produces a dissonance within the film, signifying love as dangerous, as something that causes alarm. The formal interrogation of her lover's image in the film takes on both a curious, searching quality and a desire to deconstruct what he signifies. Schneemann searches memories, desires, and anxieties contained in the photographic remains of her relationship. And yet the male is not the central protagonist of the film—Schneemann is. This can be seen in the different ways that the two figures are framed and the manner in which the sound impacts this framing. While both are represented through archival images of their life together, Schneemann is shown to be more active, such as when she handwrites her signature on the screen, burns a film frame, or takes a sledgehammer to a projection of her lover's image. The image of her lover is framed as an idealized space of fantasy, a feature emphasized by the sonic score that accompanies his image: it is either alarmist (the siren) or nostalgic, as bits of rock ballads erupt loudly over his photo.

The sharply contrasting soundtrack, combined with her desire to destroy his image, is most clearly articulated in the initial and closing sections of the film. *Plumb Line* begins and ends with a sequence in which a plumb line swings pendulumlike in front of an image of a man. The image is then consumed by flames and burns away onscreen. The following shot is of Schneemann's hand entering the frame and inscribing the title of the film

and her name on the space where the burned image was. This first image—a photographic still of the man frozen onscreen—is not just an entry point into the film, but also an indexical framing of the film frame itself. It documents the way images are presented in cinema—through a projector and onto a screen. As a comment on the instability of the (projected) image, Schneemann destroys this image by burning it onscreen. It is a violent act that forces viewers to contemplate the significance of the man’s burning image and the authorial force of Schneemann as filmmaker. Schneemann’s inclusion of her own hand writing the title and signing her name provides a second important intervention into notions of authorship. This gesture, filmed in real time, situates a woman as the agent claiming this filmic space. It is both unremarkable (because artists have signed their work for centuries) and powerful (because it documents a woman’s body as the maker of an image). Unlike Wieland’s gesture of silence as refusal in *Water Sark*, this is a direct assertion of authorship that addresses women’s historic exclusion from the art world. Both gestures greatly complicate the relationship among bodies, language, and the social that, as Silverman notes, are central markers of feminist filmmaking. While Schneemann offers a very different form of articulation than *Water Sark* does, this grounding figure in *Plumb Line* is equally powerful in its critique of the institutional and cultural discourses women artists faced at that time.

In a second significant sequence, Schneemann complicates her assertion of authorship when she reveals herself in a state of psychic collapse via a recorded voiceover. The affect contained within Schneemann’s audio recording of herself at this moment of deep despair reveals her vulnerability by sharing her distress during the aftermath of her relationship. She notes that the voiceover text was “made by me flipping on a tape recorder as I wandered through my studio in a state of emotional collapse triggered by the endless Vietnam atrocities and the dissolution of my long relationship with [partner James] Tenney.”³¹ The monologue records her talking in a labored manner about pills, not being able to stand the sun, losing weight, and the advice of her concerned friends, and it ends as she listlessly describes food on a plate. Throughout the monologue, Schneemann has difficulty speaking clearly, the slurred and mumbling words conveying the extent of her emotional collapse. The force of her voiceover exceeds the traditional comfort of spectatorial distance.

Yet this scene is not a wholly negative encounter. Instead Schneemann presents her pain as a site of articulation. As in Wieland’s fragmented representation of herself, here Schneemann clearly attempts to “speak the body

differently.”³² While women’s emotional pain is conventionally portrayed in the realm of melodrama, Schneemann does not rely on such generic tropes. She is not punished or constrained by the narrative arc but rather becomes a speaking subject who refuses clarity. What she usefully acknowledges is that such painful experiences are a part of women’s subjective experience. Schneemann creates an encounter with the viewer from this moment of emotional excess. She gives voice to the chaos of bodies in pain and thus expands the repertoire of women’s representation in film. This is not an overwrought body on display for the viewer’s catharsis, but a body articulating its trauma for its own catharsis, placing the viewer in the uncomfortable position of witness. This disruptive, struggling, honest voice existing apart from the diegetic space reflects Doane’s observation that the voice-off “validates . . . what the screen reveals” as much as “what it conceals.” Here Schneemann situates the film frame as a place to reveal nuanced versions of women, which are routinely concealed by dominant narrative codes and representational forms. Her experimental use of asynchronous sound exposes “the material heterogeneity of the cinema” and its possibilities to allow differing versions of women and their complexities to be mirrored through the complexity of experimental forms.³³ What is significant about Schneemann’s noncompliant offscreen voice is that “its potential work as a signifier is revealed.”³⁴ Like Wieland’s challenge to the disembodied author of structuralist filmmaking in *Water Sark*, Schneemann’s inclusion of this audio recording confronts the presumed modernist values of detachment, asserting instead pain and suffering as a point of engagement and connection. They articulate more intersubjective relations “between the diegesis, the visible space of the screen, and the acoustical space of the theatre”³⁵ by addressing the audience and their bodily responses to hearing Schneemann’s suffering articulated so palpably on the soundtrack. This, alongside her authorial signature, offered important alternative trajectories from women’s limited roles as images and filmmakers during the rise of American avant-garde film in the 1960s.

LOOPING ARTICULATIONS OF SUBJECTIVITY AND MOTHERHOOD IN *MY NAME IS OONA*

My Name Is Oona (1969; fig. 3) is Gunvor Nelson’s unconventional portrait of her daughter Oona during her transition from girl to adolescent. Nelson captures the ephemeral quality of Oona’s in-between status through a rhythmic collage of her daughter’s image and voice. The film’s form reflects Oona’s personal transformation by producing an equally liminal film space. This formal mirroring presents a forward momentum within the film that is similar to



FIGURE 3. *My Name Is Oona* (1969, dir. Gunvor Nelson). (Courtesy of vimeo.com)

Oona's headlong movement toward adulthood. The film's construction of a transformational aesthetic space is one of the strongest formal elements in the work. In the film, Nelson addresses questions of space, audio dissonance, and the articulation of an alternative subjectivity for girls and women from her dual position as filmmaker and mother.

The film's first image is a close-up of Oona looking directly at the camera and smiling. Her face is framed by the bright sunlight behind her. She seems to be floating in a nowhere space. The audio starts toward the end of this opening shot, with Oona stating, "My name is Oona." The declaration provides the foundation of the film's audio track and highlights the film's interest in how Oona comes into being through the performative utterance of her name. The opening sequence is followed by a series of fleeting shots of Oona, on rich, high-contrast black-and-white film, running in and out of the frame interspersed with black leader. The audio repeats Oona's assertion of her name over and over, punctuating the images and becoming a chant that echoes and overlaps as it gets louder. The chaos and frenzy of Oona's energy on screen and in her voiceover are palpable. This sequence establishes Oona's willful drive; she is both playful and seriously determined even in these moments of play.

In the next sequence, the camera travels through an otherworldly landscape of trees in filmic negative, resembling a white mass of branches against a black sky. The soundtrack asserts over and over in echo, “My name is Oona . . . Oona . . . Oona . . . Oona.” The formal merging of Oona’s assertion of her identity with these evocative images of nature turned inside out is compelling.³⁶ The motion of the camera passing through the trees overlaps and then dissolves into a superimposition of Oona’s face as she looks downward in quiet concentration. This is intercut with more images of Oona running wildly back and forth in front of the camera, almost as if she is taunting it. Here the audio repetition of “Oona” gets louder, becoming a relentless assertion in varying rhythmic intonations. Viewers are given a sense of Oona’s intensity through both her physical movements and her aural utterance(s). Nelson’s representation of Oona through these fleeting images and repetitious assertions of her name reflect what Sjogren notes as “the most intriguing and provocative characteristics of the voice”: “its fluidity, its non-specularity, its heterogeneity.”³⁷ Audiences are never given the satisfaction of a young woman who is arrested *as* a spectacle onscreen. Instead Oona’s transition from girl to woman is emphasized by the heterogeneous nature of her vocal utterances. Nelson’s soundtrack suggests that there are many ways for Oona to assert her subjectivity by voicing her name. These utterances are fluid and meld together while also contesting and competing with one another, each assertion stronger than the last.

The final set of images frames Oona in a cape, riding her horse, backlit by a sunset. Once again, Nelson superimposes different images of Oona, this time including slow-motion close-ups of her in action. Oona rides away from the camera, and in the last rays of sunlight she looks very much like an otherworldly figure in transition. Some images in this section are out of focus and very dark, and it seems as if Oona is melding with the landscape she rides through. A new audio layer of Oona saying, “My name is Oona” emerges just at the point in the visuals when it seems that Oona is about to fly away from both the camera’s gaze and her mother’s grasp. This audio track includes many new and different intonations of her stating her name, including one that slowly drags out the four words and another that is quick, decisive, and impatient. The audio builds to a crescendo of echoing “Oonas” like a chorus singing in surround sound. This fleeting chorus of Oona asserting herself successfully produces a “a continual displacement of the gaze which ‘catches’ the woman’s body.” What Nelson provides through this restless flow of images and repetitious audio is an arresting of Oona “only accidentally, momentarily, refusing to hold or fix her in the frame.”³⁸ The asynchronous yet thematically unified relationship between

sound and image provides a sense of harmony as viewers watch Oona willfully contest the fixed image of femininity to which she might have been relegated. Nelson's portrait of her daughter as a woman grounded in her sense of self was, and is, a rare vision of young adulthood.

The chorus of "Oonas" lessens as the spectator encounters a last image of Oona, smiling gently as she looks into the camera and directly toward her mother filming. The look is kind, curious, and self-assured. It is a snapshot of Oona in the midst of becoming. Her certainty reassures the viewer, who has to some degree taken on the anxiety of motherhood that Nelson conveys with her searching camera. This image is held to the end of the film, while a final audio track emerges and the other tracks fade away. The final audio is of Nelson singing a Swedish lullaby, which continues through the credits only to fade out as the image goes to white.

Nelson's transitional film world and accompanying soundscape are loving, ambiguous, and at times distant. The film reveals its maker's attempt to understand her daughter's emergence as a separate being, an attempt that is highlighted by the meticulous composition of Oona asserting her name over and over. Inserting her own voice at the end of the film, Nelson's lullaby provides an elegy on the passing of time and on her yearning for her daughter paired with her daughter's contradictory move toward independence. The groundlessness of the overlapping audio and superimposed visuals reflect the difficult limbo of the parent-child relationship. The film formally offers a sense of liminality that challenges what is possible in film, especially with regard to representing mother-daughter relationships. Through this focus, the film veers again into questions of domesticity and the cultural prescriptions of motherhood. Nelson successfully challenges any critical devaluing of the film's subject matter through her formally rigorous audiovisual composition. In the liminal space of the film, Nelson undermines "the believability in film space as a secure or stabilized arena for expression" and reveals instead "the impossibility of a stable identity or a totalizing image in film."³⁹ This undermining is entirely in keeping with the fleeting glimpses of adolescence Nelson provides. The unstable formal structure of the film mirrors the instability of representing women's subjectivity in youth, and perhaps at any stage of life. The relationship she characterizes onscreen has very little overlap with dominant representations of motherhood and girlhood. Nelson constructs a complex exploration of both the mother's and daughter's positions that provides little certainty but does afford a celebration of autonomous subjectivity, even in her (and our) ambivalent relationship to such autonomy. The film asserted the experiences of adolescence and motherhood as a valid subject matter and site of the filmmaker's

articulation at a moment when they were not fully embraced within the avant-garde cinema or the art world.

ARTICULATING A FEMINIST EXPERIMENTAL AESTHETIC FOR THE FUTURE

My readings of *Water Sark*, *Plumb Line*, and *My Name Is Oona* consider how Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson used sound to articulate a feminist politics that was critical of the cultural roles and private spaces women grappled with in the 1960s. Following Griselda Pollock's influential reading of early modern women painters, I situate Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson as "cultural producers within specific historical formations" simultaneously struggling with the ways that gender structured "their lives and work."⁴⁰ As such, their formal experiments produced a "rearticulation of [cinematic] space," not for "the mastering gaze" but instead as a "locus of relationships."⁴¹ By reenvisioning cinematic space onscreen through asynchronous soundtracks, their films worked against both the mastering gaze of traditional cinema and certain elements of modernist aesthetics. They opened up alternative modes of cinematic address that situated women's struggles toward gendered expectations at the center of each film. Their asynchronous sound and disembodied voices asserted women's subjectivity differently through dissonant resistance. Their engagement with discordant sounds of noncompliance, silence, and repetition consciously unsettled spectator expectations by engaging in a more dialogic mode of address. Their aesthetic experiments, grounded in their lived experience, their bodies, and their subjectivities, allowed for the articulation of struggle and ambivalence and the refusal of cultural norms. Together these elements produced more intersubjective relationships among filmmaker, onscreen space, and spectator.

While their work varies both aesthetically and thematically, Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson equally displace representational conventions and undermine how women are spoken (both formally and critically) by film discourse. In all three films, the image is destabilized through the use of dissonant, challenging soundscapes and the articulation of "other" kinds of voices—voices of silence and refusal, of pain and distress, and active utterances of subjectivity and burgeoning independence. Each artist's strategic use of sound as point of disruption within the *mise en scène* set an important standard for future feminist experimental film practice. Through these dissonant experimental forms, each filmmaker opened greater space within cinema to vocalize the struggles of women not only as artists, but also as wives, mothers, and lovers. Their films validated these cultural roles as valuable subjects of cinema in their own

right and challenged the more limited articulations of these subjects in classical Hollywood and avant-garde cinema alike.

In addition to three films examined in this essay, the critical use of sound-image dissonance is also found in more recent feminist screen-based art that addresses the gendered constraints of cultural roles and spaces. It can be seen, for instance, in Shirin Neshat's defiant placement of a woman singing in public in *Turbulent* (1998); in Pipilotti Rist's witty use of sound as counterpoint in any number of her explorations of domestic space, including *Himalaya Sister's Living Room* (2000); and in Eija-Liisa Ahtila's use of repetition and discordant audio in *The House* (2002). Wieland, Schneemann, and Nelson set an early example of the types of formal and thematic concerns pursued by these and many other subsequent artists. It is precisely such attention to the relationship among women's bodies onscreen, the resistant audiovisual syntax of their films, and their relationship to the complex constraints of the social that make *Water Sark*, *Plumb Line*, and *My Name Is Oona* such significant forerunners to the rich body of feminist experimental film and media that has followed. A mapping of this trajectory between the 1960s and the present would reveal important overlaps and shifts between these different cultural moments. What critical ambivalences and formal interventions are shared among the works of Wieland, Schneemann, Nelson, and other early forerunners of feminist experimental film and their counterparts in the present? What are we still grappling with in relation to cultural expectations, gendered spaces, and the domestic? And what, if anything, has changed? ■

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NOTES

1. B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 282.

2. *Ibid.*, 284.

3. Starting in the late 1960s, a range of publications began to document and define the rise of avant-garde film practice in postwar America. These early texts compose a substantial discursive field that covers the history, formal innovations, theories, and manifestos of artists and critics associated with the movement. This large body of work includes Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*

(New York: Dutton, 1967); P. Adams Sitney, ed., *Film Culture: A Reader* (New York: Praeger, 1970); David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema: A Fifty-Year Evolution* (West Sussex, UK: Littlehampton Book Services Ltd, 1971); Jonas Mekas, ed., *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959–1971* (New York: Collier Books, 1972); P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); P. Adams Sitney, ed., *The Essential Cinema: Essays on the Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archive* (New York: New York University Press, 1975); and Marilyn Singer, *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (New York: American Federation of the Arts, 1976).

4. “The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group,” in *Film Culture: A Reader*, 83.

5. Such as the lyrical, mythopoeic, or structuralist film. See Sitney, ed., *Visionary Film*.

6. In addition to Rich, *Chick Flicks*, see Patricia Mellencamp, *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film Video, & Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990); Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943–1971* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Jackie Hatfield, “Imagining Future Gardens of History,” *Camera Obscura* 62, 21, no. 2 (2006): 185–91; and Robin Blaetz, “Introduction: Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks,” in *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

7. Such criticism directed its “focus on the female artist’s body in a way that they might not for a man” (Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 9).

8. For example, early descriptions by critics identified Joyce Wieland as “Mrs. Snow,” effectively shadowing her under the career and status of her then-husband Michael Snow rather than emphasizing her own specific art practice. See Barrie Hale, “The Vanguard of Vision: Notes on Snow and Wieland,” in *Documents in Canadian Film*, ed. Donald Fetherling (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1988), 249–59.

9. These omissions are recently changing in positive ways for select feminist experimental filmmakers from this era. New archival initiatives have begun, including the release of a completion of Joyce Wieland’s complete works on DVD by the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Center (CFMDC) in 2011; the offering of a large range of Schneemann’s film and performance works within the Electronic Arts Intermix catalogue; and the 2011 release of Gunvor Nelson’s early films from 1966 to 1973 in the compilation *Departures from Re:Voir* video in Europe and Canyon Cinema in the United States.

10. See Blaetz, ed., *Women’s Experimental Cinema*; and Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman, eds., *Women and Experimental Filmmaking* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005). For specific work on Wieland, see Kathryn Elder, ed., *The Films of Joyce Wieland* (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival, 1999). On Schneemann, see Kristine Stiles, ed., *Correspondence Course: An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Kenneth White, ed., “Focus on Carolee Schneemann,” *Millennium Film Journal* 54 (Fall 2011); and Lawrence Alloway et al., *Carolee Schneemann: Unforgivable* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015). On Nelson, see John Sundholm, ed., *Gunvor Nelson and the Avant-Garde*

(New York: Peter Lang, 2003); and Gunvor Nelson, *Still Moving* (Karlstad, Sweden: Centre for Creative Arts, 2002).

11. Their exploration of such subjects made it easy for critics to align them with mass culture. Andreas Huyssen points out this is something that aesthetic modernism took great pains to separate itself from. Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 44–64.

12. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 142.

13. *Ibid.*, 44.

14. Britta Sjogren, *Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox in Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 14.

15. *Ibid.*, 6.

16. Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," *October* 17 (1981): 25.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Sjogren, *Into the Vortex*, 17.

20. Paul Arthur, "Different/Same/Both/Neither: The Polycentric Cinema of Joyce Wieland," in *Women's Experimental Cinema*, 61.

21. These objects include a blue teapot, a vase of pink flowers and greenery arranged on a white table, two drinking glasses, and a clear glass bowl, all filled with water; a colorful plastic toy boat suspended in midair; a window framing a vague cityscape of buildings at dusk; a round white paper lantern with a bright bulb in it; a pair of rubber gloves; and Wieland holding a camera to her eye.

22. Here I agree with Robin Blaetz's reading of Wieland as an artist who included a sense of wit and irony in her work; I believe it is clearly manifest in the reflexive camera movements in *Water Sark* and other films. See Blaetz, "Introduction," in *Women's Experimental Cinema*, 7–9.

23. Thanks to Jennifer Doyle for helping me to identify this sound more clearly.

24. Joyce Wieland, quoted in Kay Armatage, "Kay Armatage Interviews Joyce Wieland," *Take One* 3, no. 2 (1970): 23.

25. Arthur, "Different/Same/Both/Neither," 53.

26. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 193–94.

27. Sjogren, *Into the Vortex*, 14.

28. In this sequence, the scale of her magnified mouth and eyes, in relation to the rest of her face, provides an unsettling break in the image. Wieland successfully undermines the existing traditions of both the close-up and the framing of women's faces in traditional cinema.

29. Sjogren, *Into the Vortex*, 14.

30. *Ibid.*, 15.

31. Carolee Schneemann, quoted in M. M. Serra and Kathryn Ramey, "Eye/Body: The Cinematic Paintings of Carolee Schneemann," in *Women's Experimental Cinema*, 118.

32. Doane, "Women's Stake," 34.

33. Doane uses the term *voice-off* differently than Sjogren does. For Doane, it refers to a voice that does not correspond to a character within the frame. While we may have seen this character previously in the frame, she is absent at the moment that the voice is heard. Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 571.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. This reversal of the film image further disorients the viewer's sense of space, bringing forward a fully other space that exists only in the material in-between of film's chemical processes. The stage of transition between the material imprint of light on a filmstrip and a chemically transformed image is the negative print that we see onscreen.

37. Sjogren, *Into the Vortex*, 13.

38. Doane, "Women's Stake," 34. Here she is speaking specifically of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977).

39. Binnie Brook Martin, "Sound and Visual Metaphor in *Faces of Women*," in *Film Studies: Women in Contemporary World Cinema*, ed. Alexandra Heidi Karriker (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 190. Martin is specifically discussing postcolonial forms of cinematic resistance in her article; however, her discussion of image-sound dissonance offers an important correlate to feminist film practices.

40. Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity, and the Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 119.

41. Ibid., 124.