

## **Raised Fists: Politics, Technology, and Embodiment in 1970s French Feminist Video Collectives**

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**Abstract:** This article assesses the impact and import of 1970s French feminist video collectives, focusing on the relationship between technology, subjectivity, and embodiment. It investigates how early portable video technology provided the tools for an exploration of subjectivity as collective and political, focusing in particular on the work of French activist video collectives Vidéo Out, Les Muses s’amusent, and Les Insoumuses. Arguing for protoqueer, nomadic, dissident, and performative modes of expression, the article demonstrates that collective subjectivity never follows a clear, linear pattern but rather emerges, so to speak, through the lines, much like the video image itself.

**Keywords:** video collectives, Carole Roussopoulos, Portapak, post-1968, French activism

At the end of *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* (*Maso and Miso Go Boating*, dir. Nadja Ringart, Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig, Ioana Wieder, France, 1976) a floating, handwritten title credit reads: “No televisual image wants or is able to represent us. We express ourselves with video.” An extraordinary example of video’s capacity to disrupt and reinvent the hegemonic, bland, and watered-down politics of feminism shown on television screens, *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* concludes by displaying the signatures of four women (“Carole,” “Delphine,” “Ioana,” and “Nadja”) intent on proving that only video provides the emancipatory tools their politics require. These four women—Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig, Ioana Wieder, and Nadja Ringart—are collectively known as Les Muses s’amusent. The name of the group, like the title of the film, reveals an ingenious and virtually untranslatable play on words as these women search for new forms of textual and audiovisual language that is at once playful, ironic, and irate, a language that would always be expressed in the first-person plural.<sup>1</sup>

The way that *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* was taken up in France in the early 1970s was clearly influenced by the aftermath of 1968, with its urgent call to conceive new forms of collective relations characterized by political exigency, as well as by the emergence of a

feminist politics that focused on the power of collective action both on the streets and in domestic spaces in the form of consciousness-raising groups. It is significant that, unlike in the US, video art did not arrive in France until the late 1970s, since video was taken up principally by activist groups that explicitly used video documentary as a political weapon. The history of activist video in France remains largely undocumented compared to that of art video, despite the fact that in France, video work was overtly political from its very origins, often refusing to be categorized as “art” but demanding, instead, screenings at meetings, in town squares, and on the street where the action was taking place.<sup>2</sup>

Directors Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard (along with the Dziga Vertov Group), are the most well-known of the original video makers, using video alongside film. Carole Roussopoulos, though lesser known than her male counterparts, was the most prolific *vidéaste* of this period. Significantly, she never migrated to film but continued to work in analog and, later, digital video until her death in 2009. Throughout her career, Roussopoulos was involved in more than 150 videos, nearly all of them documentaries, which were rarely signed with her own name but rather with the names of the collectives she was part of, such as the aforementioned Les Muses s’amusent and the groups Les Insoumuses and Vidéo Out. While there were other video collectives operating at the time, such as Les Cent fleurs, Vidéo 00, Slon video, and the lesbian separatist collective Vidéa, the work of Vidéo Out and Les Muses s’amusent will be the focus of this article’s mapping of the connections between feminism, protoqueer politics, issues surrounding race and ethnicity, and the politics of migration and border crossing in 1970s France.

Roussopoulos’s stated aim was to “privilege the approach of the voiceless,” teaching others how to use video in order to tell their own stories and allowing her subjects the space to speak without interruption.<sup>3</sup> Godard wrote an open letter to Roussopoulos in 1979 that was published in *Cahiers du cinéma* and reflected on the way she travelled around with her “little

black and white Sony. . . filming others so frenetically,” concluding that she had a tendency to “hide behind the image of the other” to effectively efface herself.<sup>4</sup> While this reads as a criticism, it fits perfectly with Roussopoulos’s declared intention to prioritize others representing themselves over herself representing others. Of course, she never managed to completely efface herself from her work, but she had a level of respect for her participants and actively involved her subjects in the process, which would not have been possible in a more auteurist approach. This was largely because she always worked as part of collective movements. Her orientation corresponds to the emphasis, first, on participation that underpinned much of the political activity of late 1960s France and, second, on collectivity in feminist politics. There is naturally a tension that emerges between identifying the role of Roussopoulos as an individual and recognizing the collective nature of the work of these video groups. While I want to acknowledge the importance of Roussopoulos’s contribution, I also note that the political impulses behind these videos always came from collective meetings, and that was why these videos covered such a broad range of issues. Indeed, Roussopoulos’s interest in feminist politics began when a group of feminists involved with the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF, French Women’s Liberation Movement) asked her to help edit the first feminist video made in France, *Grève de femmes à Troyes* (dir. Cathy Bernheim, Ned Burgess, Catherine Deudon, Suzanne Fenn and Annette Lévy-Willard, 1971). They subsequently invited her to the MLF’s weekly meetings. Later, via the video workshops she ran for other women, she met Ioana Wieder and Delphine Seyrig, with whom she would form Les Muses s’amuse and Les Insoumuses and establish the Parisian archive and distribution center, the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir.

Early portable video provided an excellent tool for the tasks of collective activism. The Sony Portapak that Godard refers to, which arrived in France at exactly the right time (1968), was initially intended by its manufacturers to be taken up by families and tourists

interested in portable technology that would allow them to capture weddings, anniversaries, and special outings on tape. Portapak marketing materials in the 1970s make this family emphasis clear. Ironically, given the Portapak's popularity with feminist collectives, many of the advertisements feature young attractive models in order to demonstrate that the technology is so lightweight, low cost, and easy to operate that even a woman would be capable of using it. It was precisely for the opposite reasons that feminist collectives took it up: Portapak was cumbersome and expensive, and no editing equipment was available in the early days. Rather than its capacity to preserve memory, it was the possibility of erasure that made it so attractive to those who wanted to rewind and record over their tapes so that they would not need to keep restocking them, as was required when working with film.

A key advantage of video was its capacity for instant playback, which meant, unlike with film, video makers did not need to process their material in order for their subjects to see what had been taped. In some cases, as with *Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent* (*The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak Out*, dir. Carole Roussopoulos, France, 1975), this immediacy built a sense of trust between those being filmed and the video makers, without which the video could not have been made. Another related advantage is the relative discretion of video, which took up less space and required less equipment than film. These videos were often made outdoors using natural light, and video makers could operate thirty-minute continuous takes. As Jean-Paul Fargier writes, this created a certain tendency for long takes and for sequences that were “too chatty,” privileging “speech that is not edited, divided, or ‘butchered’ . . . gradually unfolding in the spirit of resentment, anger, and enthusiasm.”<sup>5</sup> The main advantage, particularly for the feminists, was that it was a relatively new medium that had yet to be appropriated by the mainstream media and its patriarchal structures and thus stood in opposition to the male-dominated cinema and television industries.

The overall issue that motivates this article is the relationship between video technology and ways of representing the body. If, as Vivian Sobchack writes, different forms of moving image technology “have not only historically *symbolized* but also historically *constituted* a radical alteration . . . of our bodily sense of existential presence to the world, to ourselves, and to others,”<sup>6</sup> I want to consider how such a “radical alteration” functions in the context of 1970s French feminism. This essay thus seeks to examine what forms of presence and relation emerge through activist video in 1970s France, exploring how portable video enabled the expression of a series of radical politics that refused to be confined to a TV screen. It intends to offer, through an analysis of some of these videos, a model of collective subjectivity that rests on distinctive yet interconnected modes: the queer, the nomadic, the dissident, and the performative.

### **Queer Looks**

It was Jean Genet who first persuaded Roussopoulos to buy the Sony Portapak camera with her redundancy pay from *Vogue* magazine, where she had been fired for standing up for the rights of her coworkers. Genet, who knew Roussopoulos and her partner Paul Roussopoulos from their involvement in political movements, persuaded her that the Portapak was an indispensable tool that would revolutionize all forms of communication. Roussopoulos had no training or interest whatsoever in film, but, accompanied by Genet, she went directly to the shop on Boulevard Sébastopol, deposited her check, and bought the camera, which was the second sold in France (the first having been purchased by Godard).<sup>7</sup> A lack of training or experience in the film or television industries would define the work of many feminist video collectives in the 1970s, giving them a completely different outlook on the purpose of filming or taping—not to produce a finished product but to capture fleeting, often out-of-focus moments, shakily, with an urgency that conveyed a clear message: do not trust anything you see on television. The earliest surviving tape of Vidéo Out, Roussopoulos’s project with her

partner, is *Genet parle d'Angela Davis* (*Angela Davis Is at Your Mercy*, dir. Carole Roussopoulos, France, 1970). This is a seven-minute tape of Genet reading out a text he had written in support of Angela Davis and the Black Panthers for a television program to be aired on the French national television channel ORTF. Genet had been invited to speak about a subject of his choosing, and, fearing that the recording would be censored, he asked Roussopoulos to come along and tape the process. As the handwritten title sequence explains, Genet's intervention was, as he had predicted, never aired. Vidéo Out's tape thus remains as a testament to video's opposition to television. Roussopoulos captures not only all three of Genet's takes reading the text but also all the bits in between. Confined to a small corner with her compact camera, Roussopoulos documents the clapper board, the light-meter reading, the sound-recording equipment, and even members of the team fetching Genet a glass of water and giving him advice on how to read the text. The Portapak camera seems to display a kind of shaky curiosity, at once intrepid and inquisitive, implicitly critical in its refusal to provide the viewer with a clear, stable shot, and taking up a tiny fraction of the space required by the imposing and unnecessary clutter of the television team.

Genet's role in Vidéo Out's early output provides anecdotal evidence of the potential importance of a queer form of vision that sought to provide a different view of the media and ideas the collective engaged with. This protoqueer history of video is a good place to start interrogating the relationship between technology, politics, and embodiment. One movement that grew alongside video activism in the early 1970s, itself looking for radical new forms of expression that would break with the narrative modes of what we might now call "reproductive futurism" (following the work of queer theorists such as Lee Edelman),<sup>8</sup> was the Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire (FHAR, Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action). Founded by a group of students and activists including Guy Hocquenghem and Françoise d'Eaubonne, the FHAR was a militant group that met every

Thursday at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In its early days, the FHAR's aim was to provide an inclusive space for lesbians and gays and to organize interventions, demonstrations, and publications demanding lesbian and gay rights and exposing the homophobia and misogyny of the left-wing political movements that many of its members were involved with. These early stages were characterized by an unbounded enthusiasm and energy, which would later dissolve somewhat as splinter groups formed.<sup>9</sup>

Vidéo Out captured the FHAR on tape in its early and optimistic incarnation, at a time when Hocquenghem was in the process of writing his seminal text *Le Désir homosexuel* (*Homosexual Desire*, 1972). Roussopoulos attended one of the very first meetings without her camera. Members of the group then asked her if she would be willing to tape the 1 May demonstration, the FHAR's first intervention in a public space. Roussopoulos taped the demonstration and then broadcast it at the following meeting, taping, in turn, the discussion that ensued after the footage had been seen. The resulting video, *Le FHAR* (dir. Carole Roussopoulos, France, 1971), edits together the discussion with scenes from the protest. This reflexive capacity of video was characteristic of Vidéo Out's approach, in that its videos would nearly always include people talking about the video within them, creating a mise-en-abyme effect. The videos were innovative in this respect, largely due to Paul Roussopoulos's *bricoleur* approach to editing, as this was before video-editing equipment was available in France. In an interview, Carole Roussopoulos recounts how Godard at one point visited Paul to ask him for advice on how to edit; Paul's response was simply to hand Godard a roll of sticky tape.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of a latent queer politics, Vidéo Out's tape seems to urge the viewer to see differently, reflecting the demands of the FHAR itself. Looking back on gay politics, in his 2000 preface to Hocquenghem's *Le désir homosexuel*, René Schérer writes of "the need for a complete rupture with all previous interpretative systems,"<sup>11</sup> specifically in relation to

Sigmund Freud and psychoanalytic interpretations of homosexual desire. Video might also signal a rupture in systems of interpretation, whether psychoanalytic or cinematic, that would require a rethinking of spectatorship. Such a rethinking would need to correspond to the ideas behind the FHAR's proposals, which highlight the social and collective politics of homosexuality. Hocquenghem's appropriation of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's vocabulary is relevant here. In the closing paragraph of *Le Désir homosexuel* he writes, "Grouped homosexual desire transcends the confrontation between the individual and society by which the molar ensures its domination over the molecular. It is the slope towards transsexuality [*trans-sexualité*] through the disappearance of objects and subjects, a slide towards the discovery that in matters of sex everything is simply communication."<sup>12</sup>

Hocquenghem's notion of *trans-sexualité* seems to have little to do with transsexuality or transgender politics and identity, so this phrase potentially poses a problem that highlights the well-documented tensions between transsexual and queer politics (which do not fall within the purview of this article but which I have explored elsewhere).<sup>13</sup> Rather, it appears as a term specific to his understanding of sexuality (rather than identity) as a slippery, nonhierarchical, or, to use Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, a "rhizomatic" and essentially communicative force that refuses to distinguish between subject and object, active and passive, or masculine and feminine.<sup>14</sup>

How does such an idea register in relation to video? Vidéo Out's tape displays a protoqueer gaze that surfaces in the spaces between gestures, bodies, and words. The evocation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in the FHAR's collectively signed manifesto from 1971, *Rapport contre la normalité (Report against Normalcy)*, seems particularly appropriate. The FHAR members quote Saint-Exupéry's words: "Love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking together in the same direction."<sup>15</sup> They write that "looking together in the same direction" implies one person behind the other, evoking anal sex. This

“looking together” is also, of course, reminiscent of the cinema, where bodies assemble together in a darkened room to face the screen. However, video presents us with entirely different viewing habits from cinema, habits that might seem more compatible with Hocquenghem’s model of desire as multiple, rhizomatic, and molecular. Most videos would be shown on small television monitors, sometimes several in one room, with people talking loudly, moving between screens, crowding around to get a better look, or wandering off halfway through the documentary. The movements of the handheld camera also reflect this, relying on its portability for the long takes—necessary due to a lack of editing equipment—and resulting in a gaze that wobbles in constant flux between bodies, changing direction unexpectedly, and thus potentially creating new connections and forms of relation. For example, the classic shot/reverse shot edit, which implies communication between two people facing each other, never occurs in these activist videos; conversations flow in an altogether different direction.

In Alessandro Avellis’s 2006 documentary film about the FHAR, *La Révolution du désir: 1970, la libération homosexuelle* (*The Revolution of Desire: 1970, Homosexual Liberation*, France), Roussopoulos describes how she was able to do fifteen-minute takes without moving from where she stood and how she was able to tape and smoke at the same time, which explains some of the shakier moments in *Le FHAR*. She states that “the FHAR was about transforming life, creating new forms of relations,” commenting on the brilliance of Anne-Marie Grélois’s vocabulary as she denounces “*flikatres*,” “*hétéroflics réformistes*,” and “*phallocrates*” (coppers, reformist hetero-cops, and phalocrats).<sup>16</sup> While Roussopoulos laments the relative obsolescence of this vocabulary, one could say the same of Vidéo Out’s video language. Fargier writes of Roussopoulos: “She jumps, plunges, immerses herself in the action, inventing a new language”<sup>17</sup>—a language that emerges from the interaction of this relatively new technology with the body of the video maker. He continues, “The portable

camera merges with the body of the filmmaker, increases her autonomy, reinforces her intrepidity, the ease of her movements . . . the sound camera throws itself into the action as if it were participating, the real is swallowed up in one fell swoop, and chaos flows like a river” (16).

What ensues is an instinctively anarchic, do-it-yourself aesthetics that beautifully echoes the politics of the FHAR. In Vidéo Out’s tape Hocquenghem speaks of the influence of the MLF and the notion that “we’ll start with what we are and not just with our political ideas . . . starting from the gut.” This is a distinctly corporeal form of revolution, and the video intervention in no way seeks to present a detached, objective picture, instead drawing attention to its own presence by shifting in and out of focus, wandering around to capture the faces in the meeting, refusing to provide factual information such as captions explaining who each participant is, or a voice-over providing a context. This marks a distinctive departure from more conventional television documentary with its head shots and captions. Roussopoulos’s haphazard style encapsulates what is politically at stake in these images, intervening in an appropriately queer way.

Recalling Fargier’s assertion that video is “too chatty,” it is clear that this tape is no exception. Yet the most memorable parts of the tape are nonverbal, particularly the fantastic three separate moments when one person interrupts the video with incredibly distinctive laughter in response to someone talking in a reactionary, bourgeois way about having sex. At these points Roussopoulos’s camera shakes and wobbles, zooming in on the culprit’s face and capturing the laughter with a spontaneity that joins in with this gleeful interruption. While immediacy elsewhere underscores the urgency and violence of the FHAR’s proposals, which were sparked by anger and resistance to the dominant heteronormative ideology, here it reminds us of the humor involved. Throughout, the camera focuses intently on gestures, recalling the idea of politics as an embodied force. We see how Roussopoulos tapes faces but

often moves down to hands, with several close-ups of hands on chins. These more pensive moments are intercut with scenes from the 1971 May Day march showing wild, free dancing and camp interventions that prefigure the later activism of the Gazolines (a group formed out of the FHAR in 1972 committed to camp visibility and gender-defying protest). These more liberated, potentially queer movements stand in stark contrast to the rigid gestures of disapproval from judgmental onlookers in the forms of frowns, head shakes, and fist shaking. The unexpected gestures of the camera, held in one raised fist, play a role as much as the bodies the camera displays and are almost inseparable from them. This taping gesture fluctuates between attention and distraction, visible on-screen in the camera's tendency to wander around recording faces before returning to the speaker, always in close-up, never immobile, but continually making its operator's presence felt, the gaze of the machine rippling through the room like contagious laughter.

## **Video Nomadism**

Portable video thus seems apt for providing a wandering, nonlinear, nomadic gaze of the kind that Hocquenghem, following Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalytic model,<sup>18</sup> advocates for the expression of desire. This also seems to correspond in part with Michèle Le Dœuff's description of the women's movement in France, as she writes that it was not so much a coherent set of ideas as it was a "disorientation" that "lacked precise boundaries in relation to its objects and projects" and was at once "polymorphous" and "scattered."<sup>19</sup> Rosi Braidotti's analysis of feminist theory likewise borrows from Deleuze and Guattari and adopts *nomadism* as a critical strategy. *Nomadism*, as she describes it, refers to a theoretical project concerned with creating a new feminist imaginary, resting on an intersectional approach that operates a fierce resistance to all forms of hegemony. Braidotti writes, "Nomadism is an invitation to disidentify ourselves from the sedentary phallogocentric monologism of philosophical thinking."<sup>20</sup> One of her key concerns is "how to reconcile partiality and

discontinuity with the construction of new forms of interrelatedness and collective political projects” (26). The most urgent question thus becomes how to reconcile the sometimes difficult terrain between theory—particularly where there is a focus on antirepresentative strategies—and activism, which often relies, particularly in the case of feminist video collectives (as Roussopoulos explicitly states), precisely on giving a voice to those who normally are considered unrepresentable. These collective forms of identity and, as Braidotti puts it, “interrelatedness” become most empowering in this context.

While taking care to distinguish the nomad from the migrant and the exile, Braidotti situates herself as a polyglot migrant turned nomad, drawing on her Italo-Australo-Franco-Dutch identity. Many of those involved in feminist video in the 1970s were also migrants from a variety of different backgrounds. Carole Roussopoulos escaped from a stifling bourgeois upbringing in Switzerland, Paul Roussopoulos was a political exile from Greece, Delphine Seyrig and Ioana Wieder grew up together in Lebanon, Nadja Ringart was the daughter of Polish and Russian Jewish migrants, and there were many migrant women involved in the activities of the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir. The politics of race and ethnicity, as well as migration, were in the videos from the very beginning, as seen in Genet’s defense of the theories and actions of Angela Davis and the Black Panthers in *Genet parle d’Angela Davis*. Paul and Carole Roussopoulos were active in Palestinian solidarity campaigns, having visited Amman alongside Mahmoud Hamchari (the French leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization) during Black September in Jordan (1970–71), when King Hussein of Jordan ordered the expulsion and massacre of large numbers of Palestinians. The video resulting from this trip was called *Hussein, le Néron d’Amman (Hussein, the Nero of Amman, dir. Carole Roussopoulos, France, 1970)*. Following the film’s screening in Paris, Vidéo Out was contacted by the Black Panthers, who wanted video-equipment training. Carole and Paul Roussopoulos spent a month in Algeria running workshops for the Black

Panthers, alongside other liberation movements from Angola and Vietnam, sharing their knowledge of how to use video equipment.

Some of the footage of the napalm victims and refugee camps that Carole and Paul Roussopoulos shot with Hamchari and Genet in Amman were later integrated into Vidéo Out's *Munich* (dir. Carole Roussopoulos and Paul Roussopoulos, France, 1972), a tape about the kidnapping of the Israeli delegation at the 1972 Munich Olympics by the Black September Organization. Vidéo Out exposes the hypocrisy of the mainstream media's response to the event and of the United Nation's condemnation of the organization for disrupting the Olympic peace by intercutting televised footage of these accusations with images from the 1936 Berlin Olympics, while noting that the "generosity of the UN" Palestinian aid packages amounts to thirty cents per day and a bowl of soup. The video *L'enterrement de Mahmoud Al Hamchari (The Burial of Mahmoud Hamchari*, dir. Carole Roussopoulos, France, 1973) follows the Parisian burial of Hamchari, assassinated in 1972 by the Israeli secret services in a revenge attack for his alleged involvement in the Munich kidnappings.

Yet many of the videos exploring racial politics focus on the difficulties within syndicalist groups in France. The video *Grève à Jeune Afrique (Strike at Jeune Afrique*, dir. Carole Roussopoulos, France, 1972) deals with the workers' strike at the Parisian journal for African migrants, where Carole Roussopoulos worked as a volunteer. Participants explain how what was initially set up as an anti-imperialist journal had since become depoliticized; as one worker announces, "It always tells you the exact opposite of what is really happening in Africa." The video follows the decision to end the strike action, which was initiated to protect workers' rights, for fear that African employees could be arrested and deported if the strike were to continue. The color video produced by Les Insoumuses, *Flo Kennedy: Portrait d'une féministe américaine (Flo Kennedy: Portrait of an American Feminist*, dir. Carole

Roussopoulos and Ioana Wieder, France, 1982), is also a particularly interesting example, highlighting the differences between black feminism in the US and the politics of race and ethnicity in relation to universalist discourse in France.

In a nomadic video project, the most interesting videos are those that take place on the borders of France. Vidéo Out and Les Muses s'amusement made two videos in the Basque country in 1975 shortly before the death of Francisco Franco and Spain's transition to democracy. *La Marche des femmes à Hendaye* (*The Women's March in Hendaye*, dir. Carole Roussopoulos and Ioana Wieder, France, 1975) documents the 1975 women's protest in support of the Basque people. Feminist groups from all over France are taped, as are Spanish, Catalan, and Basque exiles living in France. The video includes powerful interviews with groups of women from Spain, with some speaking of how difficult it is living as a migrant in France and implicitly criticizing the French value system. One interviewee, for example, declares, "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité* . . . I haven't found this anywhere here," before asking, "Where is home?" The groups, shown seated peacefully on the ground singing in front of a row of uniformed, armed officers, facing the bridge that crosses to Irún, Spain, remind us of how heavily protected our arbitrary borders can be. This issue is no less relevant today, as migration becomes increasingly restricted for those without financial means, and particularly for those fleeing repressive political regimes. "Where is home?" is a question that continually emerges in feminist video projects, reflecting how the flight from home is a key feminist issue, whether this is in relation to enforced exile or is an urge to escape from the stifling conditions of the home as it is controlled and defined by a patriarchal society. *La Marche des femmes à Hendaye* explores the intersection of both issues, recording interviews with women bearing witness to dual oppression: within the home by Spanish men, and outside, enacted by French society at large.

The emphasis in this video is on transit, beginning with optimistic images of buses arriving filled with women from all over France, laughing, talking over each other, speaking of a fun bus trip through the mountains, and ending with defiant singing reaching across a border where the groups are forcibly brought to a standstill by the border patrol. Strangely, the video cameras—of which there are many, not just Roussopoulos and Wieder’s—are able to advance farther than the protesting women, and other cameras are visible weaving in and out of the row of guards. The video closes with a still image of a group of women standing on a wall holding a banner that reads simply “à bas la mort” (“down with death”), shot from below, followed by a handwritten title that reads “seen and heard by Carole and Io, Hendaye 5th October 1975.” These words displace responsibility for the politics expressed in the tape onto those represented within it, coming in the form of a note (abbreviated and with no surnames) as a brief reminder that the video makers were there, like a form of graffiti one might see hastily sprayed onto the wall on which the women stand.

On the other side of the border, *Les Mères espagnoles* (*Spanish Mothers*, dir. Carole Roussopoulos and Ioana Wieder, France, 1975) combines images of protests from across Europe with footage of television reports, newspaper clippings, and interviews with family members of five Basque militants: Txiki, Otaegui, García Sanz, Baena, and Sánchez-Bravo Solla, all murdered by the Franco regime in 1973. Using resourceful methods to disguise the identities of some of the interviewees, including a filmed interview of a plant behind which one woman speaks, the video aims to show the farcical nature of Spain’s attempt to transition to democracy through the supposed opening up of the regime to a more liberal Europe. Clips from fascist Spanish newspaper columns condemn the protests with bizarre descriptions of “those porno-Europeans who come to tan themselves under Spain’s glorious sun,” describing antifascists as “sodomites” and writing of the “debauchery of a hysterical revolution.” The video focuses on harrowing individual interviews with the mothers of Otaegui and Txiki in

which they describe their ordeals when visiting their sons merely hours before the executions, speaking of being strip-searched and humiliated by prison guards while protesting their sons' innocence in the face of unfair trials. This stands in stark contrast to *La Marche des femmes à Hendaye*, which presents a freer, empowering picture, full of laughter, chanting, and singing.

The two tapes nonetheless speak very clearly to each other and were often screened together. The closing words of *Les Mères espagnoles* come from Txiki's mother, who directly addresses the camera and attests to the difficulty of taking action in Spain, pleading with activists across Europe to continue to fight for justice on their behalf. Unlike some of the women on the other side of the border in *La Marche des femmes à Hendaye*, these mothers are not exiles. Nor are they able to enact any form of nomadism, as Txiki's mother's words highlight: "To all the women who marched throughout Europe in support of the five men who were killed, I thank them for what they are doing. I ask them to continue so we can make some progress because they won't let us do anything here in the Basque country. I ask these women to let the world know what happened. These words come from a mother who has lost her son." Addressing the camera directly and speaking loudly with an urgent tone, Txiki's mother makes a direct appeal. Immediately following these words, she turns her head slightly to the side and says, "Let's see, what else?" just before the video abruptly cuts out, the end of the tape signaling an interruption. This unexpected, sudden ending has a strange effect, jolting the viewer from complete absorption in a powerful emotional appeal into sudden awareness of her or his surroundings; there is no fade-out, freeze-frame, credits sequence, or handwritten explanation (as with *La Marche des femmes à Hendaye*), nor any indication that the tape is about to end. The editing throughout is once again haphazard and rough, frequently cutting off speakers in mid-sentence, reminding us that the purpose is not to produce a finished product or document but to inspire others to act. The focus is on immediacy: a call to direct action.

If a theoretical nomadic project such as Braidotti's shifts the focus from enforced displacement and exile to a more empowering form of this displacement—one in which the nomad, unlike the exile, has the freedom to explore the thresholds or borders between different states or modes of subjectivity without necessarily enjoying the privilege of having a fixed location to call home—this has little to do with the experience of the mothers in *Les Mères espagnoles*. Here, then, it is video, not the women it represents, that operates on a nomadic trajectory. These women have been forcibly denied a home through the repression of their identity as well as the murder of their sons. Txiki's mother emphasizes that nobody else is representing them; the only way in which their words can be heard and action can be taken on their behalf is through video, offering its unique form of nomadism on its subjects' behalf.

The question “where is home?” thus also becomes relevant to the role of film and video and the way in which each medium works to construct memory differently. Whereas cinema is able to host its audience, it does so within the kinds of institutions that 1970s French video often explicitly opposed. While Isabelle McNeill writes, with reference to the films of Yamina Benguigui, about the possibility of film as “a virtual space that creates a sense of ‘home,’”<sup>21</sup> Laura U. Marks has written that “video has always been a homeless medium.”<sup>22</sup> This homelessness becomes all the more urgent in relation to feminist politics. I want to argue that rather than denying a home through its nomadic trajectories, 1970s French video provides a home for particular kinds of political demands while actively destabilizing the foundations on which such a home could establish itself as an institution within a patriarchal, capitalist society. Here, the focus is on home as a nonhierarchical community space in constant flux, which guarantees neither the privilege nor the stability of institutional support or even long-term preservation.

The history of these tapes' distribution also suggests that video is a process that defies fixity and the limits that are imposed on film. Both *La Marche des femmes à Hendaye* and

*Les Mères espagnoles* were distributed by individuals, smuggled between different countries, and shown to activist groups. Anne-Marie Duguet estimates that they were shown approximately two thousand times in the four months following the events they depict, although she does not say where this figure comes from.<sup>23</sup> In fact, it is extremely difficult to track the distribution of activist video, as tapes were continually being copied. One of the favorite methods of distribution for 1970s video collectives was “wheelbarrow distribution,” consisting of video monitors in car trunks, set up on the street using electricity from sympathetic shop or bar owners.<sup>24</sup> Video exhibition does not require a distribution license (the *visa d’exploitation*), as officially distributed film does in France. Video collectives were on the whole suspicious of any attempt to document or track their distribution, particularly when the *dépôt légal* came into effect in 1977.<sup>25</sup> From 1974 onwards, the distribution collective *Mon Oeil* (My Eye), formed in Paris by Marcque and Marcel Moiroud, circulated many videos as they were being made. The first Parisian distribution centre, the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir was set up in 1982 by Seyrig, Roussopoulos, and Wieder, but few distribution records were kept in the 1970s, the emphasis being more concretely on going out into the streets to get people involved. What becomes particularly apparent with the Basque tapes is that the imaginative and nomadic distribution process enables the expression of the politics of which the women speak, allowing for dissident identities to assert their right to exist, as well as questioning the overarching narratives attached to national identity and undermining the enforced boundaries and definitions of states and subjects, problematizing their declared impermeability.

### **Sexual Dissidence and Video Performance**

A different threshold is in operation in the videos exploring sex workers’ struggles in 1970s France. Vidéo Out’s 1975 video *Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent* is groundbreaking for its intimate portrayal of sex workers defining their struggle using their own terms. The threshold

at work in this instance is between the inside and outside of the Church of Saint-Nizier in Lyon. The tape depicts a group of sex workers, who were representing two hundred women in Lyon, occupying the church, demanding an end to arbitrary arrests and fines on prostitutes and greater freedom and respect from the police. This video sets itself apart from much of the feminist discourse in France at the time and from videos such as Vidéa's *Kate Millett parle de la prostitution avec des féministes* (*Kate Millett Speaks about Prostitution with Some Feminists*, France, 1975). While feminists across the country were fiercely debating the prostitution issue, it seemed that prostitutes and sex workers were often left out of the debate, as if sex work and feminism were mutually exclusive.<sup>26</sup>

*Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent*, as the title suggests, is entirely focused on the testimonials given in the church by women directly affected by the issues raised. Roussopoulos, who was inspired by reading Millet's 1975 *The Prostitution Papers* (a present from Genet), pointed out in an interview that this tape was only possible due to the technology afforded by portable video.<sup>27</sup> The sex workers on strike were extremely suspicious of Vidéo Out when the video makers arrived at the church and only agreed to participate because they were able to determine what would be broadcast by virtue of video's capacity for instant playback. This would not have been possible with film, which would have required several days to be processed by a lab before the footage could be seen. Had the video not been there, the women would have relied on handwritten posters to communicate their message to passersby, as they were wary of leaving the church for fear of being arrested; video offered the perfect medium for getting their message across. Vidéo Out was able, with its Portapak, to record inside the church during the mornings, decide with the sex workers what would be communicated in the video, and broadcast the recorded interviews outside the church in the afternoons. This process went on for a week. In turn, Vidéo Out taped the crowds that gathered to watch the small television screens that the women had cunningly

embedded in the gaps in the thick stone walls of the church. The resulting document, like so many of the 1970s videos, is a *mise en abyme* in which the video within the video becomes an agent of political activism, shaping the struggle inasmuch as it is able to mediate between two very different groups, separated by the impenetrable walls of one of the world's most enduring repressive institutions: the Catholic Church. Video's penetration of this seemingly immutable boundary only reflects the far more radical penetration by the sex workers demonstrating for their rights, yet video seems to do more than simply affirm their presence and enable the communication of their demands. In fact, it questions the very structures of representation through which these words are usually heard (or ignored), including a fundamental questioning of its own presence working within and against these structures. In this sense, we might say that video self-consciously performs its own function.

This performative capacity of video is also brought into question by those videos that reach beyond the boundaries of documentary, such as Seyrig and Roussopoulos's interpretation of Valerie Solanas's 1967 treatise in *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* (France, 1976). In this video Seyrig dictates extracts from the manifesto, word for word (including punctuation), while Roussopoulos types it out, taking a break from time to time to crank up the TV behind them. The TV displays news reports on violence and atrocities across the globe, from aerial bombings in Lebanon to assassinations in Buenos Aires, from reports about the nuclear arms race to more positive images of the 1976 Peace People's march against violence in Northern Ireland, which was instigated by a group of women. The video was undertaken when the French version of Solanas's manifesto was out of print, its reproduction performed as a gesture to recuperate feminist histories while also drawing attention to their continual erasure.

Another example can be found in Vidéo Out's *Ya qu'à pas baiser! (Just Don't Fuck!, dir. Carole Roussopoulos, France, 1973)*, which documents the MLF's fight for abortion access and reproductive rights and includes within it video footage of an illegal abortion

being carried out, using the Karman Method, in someone's living room. Once again, this video stages a transgression of the threshold between public and private space that would have been unthinkable on television simply because it was illegal and potentially dangerous for those involved. The tape opens with a long sequence from a program on ORTF debating abortion, only to reveal that we are watching television. The magnetic tape winding around the reels of the Portapak recorder is shown in this shot as it captures what is being viewed. From the start, the viewer is made aware not only of video's presence but also of how video is operating, feeding off the television set in order to scramble its message as it spews it out in distorted form.

A similar technique occurs in *Maso et Miso vont en bateau*, a video that uses many more complex strategies. Its experimentation with video editing is ingenious, and the title playfully refers to Jacques Rivette's *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (*Céline and Julie Go Boating*, France, 1974), a film in which the protagonists discover that they can intervene in the plot, altering dialogue and inserting alternative actions into the film as it progresses. *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* is a thorough reworking of Bernard Pivot's rather less radical program "Encore un jour et l'année de la femme—ouf!—c'est fini!" ("Just One More Day to Go and the Year of the Woman—Oof!—Is Over!," Antenne 2, 1975), with its invited guest Françoise Giroud, the French spokesperson for the UN's International Women's Year (1975). The original television program alone, an ill-conceived antifeminist jibe, was perfectly capable of illustrating the absurdity of an international women's year but from a chauvinist perspective. For Seyrig, Wieder, Ringart, and Roussopoulos, it provided the perfect opportunity for a playful experimentation with video's creative form of piracy. The video replays and interrupts the original program at every available opportunity and does so each time one of the participants in the discussion says something obtuse, which is seemingly almost every uttered sentence. There are also points at which images from other sources are inserted. For

example, there is video footage of the 8 March 1975 feminist march protesting against International Women's Year and footage of a rare television interview with Simone de Beauvoir about the extreme sexist reactions that the publication of *The Second Sex* (1949) provoked.

Unfolding like a video machine gone haywire, with sudden interjections in the form of incredulous exclamations, parodic written surveys, chanting, rewinding, and replaying in order to create a scat-like rhythmic repetition that serves to highlight the idiocy of some of the declarations being made, the video continually draws its own mechanisms into the limelight. In fact, it constantly reminds us that all the action in this reinterpretation is taking place offscreen, in a space outside the television studio that nonetheless has the capacity to incessantly disrupt this inaccessible domain. At one point the video cuts to a shot of the four women singing, in a parody of Giroud's own words, "Everything is fine, Madame Minister; everything is fine" in front of the television monitor in the video-editing suite, with all of the video equipment on display.

Duguet writes that this may have been the most widely circulated of the 1970s French videos, estimating that it was seen by three hundred thousand spectators by the end of 1980, thanks to its being broadcast in a variety of different public and private spaces. Even if these figures are hard to prove, given, as we saw with the Basque films, the lack of concrete data, the reactions of the television company and of Giroud are a testament to the power of this video made with the most minimal of means. Roussopoulos recounted to an interviewer how Giroud was mortified and got in touch with the video makers to ask them to stop circulating the tape. The Parisian cinema L'Olympic Entrepôt screened the video for several weeks, but it eventually had to suspend screenings after pressure from Antenne 2, the television channel responsible for the original program. The response from Les Muses s'amusement to this pressure was to declare that they would indeed stop distributing the video, but only once it

had been screened on TV, which, of course, it never was. Nonetheless, this video reached an impressively large audience.

Video becomes an appropriate medium for exploring subjectivity, sexuality, and gender as performative and mobile rather than grounded in immutable essence when it performs skewed modes of rhythm, feedback, and reproduction. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Maso et Miso vont en bateau*, in which, Duguet argues, Les Muses s'amuse to "rupture the 'natural flow' of speech, slicing into the very material of its expression, utterly demolishing this."<sup>28</sup> While *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* also explores unruly rhythms and modes of unproductivity or "unwork," as Laura Guy argues,<sup>29</sup> here it is rendered explicit in an unparalleled manner, exposing feminist activity as disruptive through the very forms of interruption, rewinding, repetition, and insertion offered by video technology.

## **Conclusion**

These videos' strength emerges at the moment when they explore the vulnerability of the image, thereby questioning, challenging, and disrupting the immutable, all-powerful structures of mainstream media representation. This can be thought of in terms of the image that video produces, which deteriorates rapidly over time. Video images are fleeting, fragile, and subject to all kinds of distortions, from static contamination to magnetic erasure. Some theorists even suggest that there is no image in video because it is an electronic medium made up of scanning lines in continual movement, whereas there is an image in film, which is a series of stills put into sequence to create the illusion of movement. Nam June Paik points out that when Godard speaks of film as truth twenty-four times a second, this is only true for film, and with video there is no truth at all and no image as such to speak of.<sup>30</sup> Yet this is more greatly evidenced in the case of video art. How might such a statement relate to activist documentary, which posits a certain sense of authenticity while paradoxically disregarding

any claim to truth as it could be represented on a television monitor? And how might it relate more specifically to the context of 1970s French feminist activism?

French feminism developed after May 1968, and these videos emerged amid the activism and critical theory that was proliferating in the universities and on the streets. As an atmosphere of dissent was permeating French society at all levels, these videos—following the publication of texts such as Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and the work of the Situationists—produced work that was very much about finding new ways of seeing that explicitly criticized any notion of truth. Feminist video collectives were not interested so much in theorizing or tapping into this dissent as they were in expressing it in their own terms, finding their own space both within and outside it, and searching for new forms through which to speak to other activists and women. Many of these videos seem to be about disrupting boundaries, thresholds, and borders in different ways, whether these are between the home and the streets, the public and the private spheres, or between different countries. This is because these videos came from a specifically feminist urge for women to seek out their own space, a search that coincided with the discovery of what was essentially, and so importantly for them, a new form of representation. Consequently, these videos defy easy categorization, explicitly refusing to fall into the category of art or avant-garde, realist, or cinema vérité labels. These women were searching for altogether different modes of expression, modes that were necessarily, rather than simply self-consciously, experimental. As is clearly visible in the videos themselves, they were learning as they were going along.

The politics of Vidéo Out, Les Insoumuses, and Les Muses s'amuse operate in both a direct and a subtle mode, emerging, much like the video image, between the lines. These videos do not say "television is lying; here's the truth." They seem to put everything, including themselves, into question, while presenting us with the images and words of disobedient, critical women who are otherwise ignored. By questioning their own means,

these collectives are not only participating but also actively showing how they participate in each political movement they deal with. This highlights direct action over any claim to truth, the video equipment working together with the bodies depicted rather than representing them from a distance or simply producing a document. It does this work by drawing attention to the body through the kinds of gestures it performs, which are rarely fixed, as the video camera and recorder become one body among others; on its most explicit level, the camera never seems to be simply taping during a protest but is always also itself protesting.

This is a mode of representation that initially in the French context distinguished itself from film, conventional documentary, and artist video, providing divergent forms of temporality. Debates about feminist forms of representation in the 1970s English-language academic context largely centered on the disruption of form inherent in avant-garde feminist film, with virtually no emphasis on documentary filmmaking.<sup>31</sup> These videos, however, occupy a shifting terrain between documentary, on the one hand, and experimentation, on the other. Where they display an insistent materiality that is self-reflexive and spontaneous, reminding us of the interventions of their participants as both reflexive and spontaneous, this is out of necessity rather than aesthetic choice. This reflects the same urgency that led feminist communities emerging around groups such as the FHAR and the MLF to take up video rather than film as the medium that best suited the exploration of a politics that came from the gut, to recall Hoquenghem's words. This curiously do-it-yourself experimentation provides affirmation that collective, spontaneous, and chaotic forms of protest could, at the time, be displayed in no other way. The question remains for contemporary viewers as to how ever-evolving current forms of video activism might reenact, incorporate, or build on the radical, collective representations of subjectivity displayed in this work.

## Notes

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1. *Les Muses s’amusent* is a reworking of Seyrig, Wieder, and Roussopoulos’s collective *Les Insoumuses*, whose name is a distortion of the words *insoumises* and *muses*. *Insoumises* translates as “insubordinates” but also refers in the French context to a group of Second Empire courtesans who refused to adhere to traditional nineteenth-century moral codes. Since the 1970s the term has been taken up by a variety of radical feminist groups seeking to transgress norms and challenge authority. “*Les muses s’amusent*” translates as “the muses are having fun.”

2. There are a few notable exceptions to this tendency to overlook activist video; see Anne-Marie Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing (Video, Memory in the Fist)* (Paris: Hachette, 1981); Stéphanie Jeanjean, “Disobedient Video in France in the 1970s: Video Production by Women’s Collectives,” *Afterall*, no. 27 (2011): 5–16; and Hélène Fleckinger, “Cinéma et vidéo saisis par le féminisme (France, 1968–1981)” (“Film and Video Seized by Feminism [France, 1968–1981]”) (PhD thesis, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle [Paris 3], 2011).

3. Nicole Brenez, “Carole Roussopoulos ou ‘l’attention créatrice’” (“Carole Roussopoulos or ‘Creative Attention’”), in Hélène Fleckinger, ed., *Caméra militante: Luttes de libération des années 1970 (Activist Camera: Liberation Struggles of the 1970s)* (Geneva: Métis Presses, 2010), 8.

4. Jean-Luc Godard, “Vingt ans après” (“Twenty Years Later”), *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 300 (1979): 30–32.

5. Jean-Paul Fargier, “Histoire de la vidéo française: Structure et forces vives” (“History of French Video: Structures and Live Forces”), in *La Vidéo entre art et communication (Video*

*between Art and Communication*), ed. Nathalie Magnan (Paris: École Nationale des Beaux-Arts, 1997), 51.

6. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 136, emphasis in original.

7. Carole Roussopoulos, interview by H el ene Fleckinger, in Fleckinger, *Cam era militante*, 99.

8. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

9. Notably, lesbian separatists started getting fed up with what they perceived to be a meat market for men who had little interest in feminist politics. For a more detailed account of lesbian separatism and the FHAR, see Marie-Jos ephe Bonnet, *Adieu les rebelles! (Farewell Rebels!)* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014), 35.

10. Carole Roussopoulos, interview by H el ene Fleckinger, 103.

11. R en e Sch erer, "Preface," in Guy Hocquenghem, *Le D esir homosexuel (Homosexual Desire)*, new ed. (Paris: Fayard, 2000), 12.

12. Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor (London: Allison and Bushby, 1978), 136.

13. Ros Murray, "Activism, Affect, Identification: Trans Documentary in France and Spain and Its Reception," *Studies in European Cinema* 11, no. 3 (2014): 170–80.

14. See Gilles Deleuze and F elix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

15. Antoine de Saint-Exup ery, quoted in FHAR, *Rapport contre la normalit e (Report against Normalcy)* (London: Pan, 1975), 203. For the original source of Saint-Exup ery's quote, see

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des hommes (Wind, Sand, and Stars)* (1939; Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1941), 200.

16. Anne-Marie Grélois was one of the founding members, alongside Guy Hocquenghem and Françoise d'Eaubonne, of the FHAR and later cofounded the lesbian feminist group Les Gouines Rouges in 1971.

17. Jean-Paul Fargier, "La vidéo militant contre la télévision" ("Activist Video against Television"), in Fleckinger, *Caméra militante*, 16.

18. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

19. Michèle Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc.* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 223.

20. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 24.

21. Isabelle McNeill, "Virtual Homes: Space and Memory in the Work of Yamina Benguigui," *L'Esprit Créateur* 51, no. 1 (2011):13.

22. Laura U. Marks, "What Is That *and* between Arab Women and Video? The Case of Beirut," *Camera Obscura*, no. 54 (2003): 43.

23. Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 56.

24. Jeanjean, "Disobedient Video in France in the 1970s," 14.

25. The *dépôt légal* is the legal requirement to submit a copy of any film made in France to a repository. It was not immediately clear how this applied to video, but once videos were

screened at cinemas in France, video makers were obliged to adhere to its regulations, although most video groups simply ignored them.

26. Vidéa's tape *Kate Millett parle de la prostitution avec des féministes* provides a fascinating overview, like *Flo Kennedy: Portrait d'une féministe américaine*, of some of the differences and similarities in US- and French-based feminism. Taking place in a tiny and cramped bookshop, with the camera visibly struggling for space and depicting heads popping through shelves between books to catch Millett, Christine Delphy, and Monique Wittig's words, it is in itself a remarkable document, but one cannot help but notice the distinct absence of the voices of those directly affected by the issues these women discuss, which is particularly surprising given that the discussion emerges from a sex workers' protest that was taking place in France at the same time.

27. Carole Roussopoulos, interview by Pauline Boudry (1997), available at [www.hybridvideotracks.org/2001/archiv/carole.pdf](http://www.hybridvideotracks.org/2001/archiv/carole.pdf).

28. Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 74.

29. Laura Guy, "Sick Texts, Scummy Rhythms" (paper presented at NEWGenNOW–SALT Symposium, London, 2014), [vimeo.com/114719764](https://vimeo.com/114719764) (accessed 15 September 2015).

30. Nam June Paik, interview by Jean-Paul Cassagnac, Jean-Paul Fargier, and Sylvia van der Stegen, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 299 (1979): 10–18.

31. See Alexandra Juhasz, "'They Said We Were Trying to Show Reality—All I Want to Show Is My Video': The Politics of the Realist Feminist Documentary," *Screen* 35, no. 2 (1994): 183.