

# When Women Watch

By Linda DeLibero

**T**he feminist film movement: quaint phrase, that, a relic of history, denoting a time when one actually spoke earnestly of the power of movies to change lives—hell, why not the world?—and which now seems as remote as the phrase “women’s liberation movement.”

But for a brief time in the early '70s, feminist films were viewed as a form of mass consciousness-raising, aimed at getting the word out about sex, work, oppression, abortion, you name it. Borrowing from older forms like the *cinéma-vérité* documentary and avant-garde film, they bore the simple but crucial difference that they were made by women, for women. And although the filmmakers were often white and middle class, the films themselves might feature housewives or secretaries or teen-age girls of all classes and colors, giving testimony to experiences that had never been screened before. Movies like San Francisco Newsreel's *The Woman's Film* were frankly agitprop, rallying women to political solidarity, to labor

## **Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement**

By 3. Ruby Rich

Duke University Press

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and community activism. Though they might look crude and naïve today, it's sobering to consider that nearly 30 years later, you still don't see many ordinary women up on the screen (or for that matter, behind the camera)—a notion that would have shocked those hopeful pioneers as much as the reality that their films have largely been forgotten.

That era of impossible idealism is part of the history B. Ruby Rich attempts to recover in *Chick Flicks*, a collection of her essays on film and women written between the mid-'70s and mid-'80s. Rich prefaces each critical piece with a personal reminiscence of the context and culture that gave rise to the essays: These are the memories of the “theories and memories” in her subtitle. Together, the critical and personal narratives tell a story by turns stimulating and depressing.



The essays explore the films (of key filmmakers like Yvonne Rainer, Chantal Akerman, Michelle Citron) and the debates (pornography, narrative strategies, theoretical approaches) that characterized feminist filmmaking during and after that early watershed period. While the critical essays present a straightforward account of films and issues, the prefaces reveal the often rancorous relations among various factions of the movement, particularly between theorists and filmmakers. While the former retreated from activism into academia, the filmmakers looked on in bewilderment as theoretical work quickly took precedence over films themselves. That's the depressing part of the story.

**R**ich is particularly well situated to tell it. A longtime film curator and critic (for, most notably, *The Village Voice* and *Sight and Sound*), she's in the rare position of having freely crossed usually impermeable boundaries: between mainstream filmmaking and the avant garde, between the academic and the popular press, between lesbian and heterosexual feminists. She seems to have known everybody in the past 25 years who has ever written about, made or professed a serious interest in film.

That free-ranging sensibility makes Rich an eminently reasonable guide

through this contested ground. She gives all sides their due; her arguments painstakingly avoid the kind of rigid binary thinking that, for example, made the pornography debates so maddeningly irrelevant to most women's lives (choose your position: Puritan or porn fancier—whips and leather optional). Rich, in her fine essay reprinted here, “Antiporn: Soft Issue, Hard World” convincingly speaks for those who opt for neither.

But pornography appears in *Chick Flicks* primarily to illustrate the kind of divisive theoretical debates that drew energy and attention away from the political power of the feminist film. If the unspoken questions that animate *Chick Flicks* might be phrased as, “Whatever happened to all that energy and promise? Whatever happened to the movies?” then Rich's answer might be, in part, “the deadening influence of theory.”

It's not that the films went away; rather they began to take a back seat to the philosophical quibbling of a small group of academics over psychoanalytic analyses of the viewing experience. Nothing signaled this shift in interest so clearly as the publication of Laura Mulvey's now famous (some say infamous) 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which, with its arcane reading of Lacan via Freud, transformed visual pleasure into guilty pleasure for any woman who had ever enjoyed a Hollywood film.

What had been a “feminist film movement” now metamorphosed into something called “feminist film theory,” whose psychoanalytic jargon and ahistorical approach were (in that time-honored perversity of academic tradition) exclusionary enough to grant it limitless cachet. As Rich writes, “the thousands of subsequent articles that footnoted Mulvey soon constituted a veritable cottage industry and effectively transformed the nature of the field, once so varied, into one concerned with the controlling power of the male gaze, the fetishization of the female body, and the collusion of narrative cinema with gender subjugation.” Not exactly fun stuff—and not the rallying cry for a popular, unifying political movement.

A pro-choice demonstration in Manhattan in 1980. Filmmaker Yvonne Rainer is second from left; B. Ruby Rich is in profile in front of the banner.



But while it's hard to dispute that feminism's retreat into the academy signaled its retreat from the politics of the movement, I'm not sure that the films Rich cites as exemplars of political enlightenment are any more effective than the theory she deplores. The attempts in those early feminist films (which Rich barely mentions) to speak to a broader-based constituency of women soon gave way to a spate of less accessible, albeit more sophisticated, experimental films that found audiences in academia. These are the movies she loves. Indeed, the world Rich describes in the personal reminiscences of *Chick Flicks* is, on the whole, a pretty insular one. It's made up largely of academics and artists, the kind of audience that will "get" movies like Rainer's *Film about a Woman Who ...* or Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, both as inaccessible to a general audience of women as Mulvey's essay. And there's the rub.

Rich has always called for a feminist politics tricked up in new, experimental forms; straightforward documentary, she claims, lends itself to mere propaganda. (Why, one might ask, isn't this just as true for the avant garde?) But what do you do with the fact that a traditional documentary like *Frontline's* "The Farmer's Wife" spoke to ordinary working women in a way that Akerman's films never could? What do you do when a "reactionary" form of narrative carries a progressive message—and it works for a certain segment of the audience? Of course, I'm being a bit reductive here in order to play devil's advocate. But if there is a major fault in *Chick Flicks*, it is Rich's easy dismissal of troubling questions like these.

In truth, many of the very films Rich champions in *Chick Flicks* have the same limited concerns as psychoanalytic theory: They're about white, middle-class women exploring the controlling

power of the male gaze and the fetishization of the female body. Furthermore, their formal strategies are as impenetrable to mainstream audiences as anything in Lacanian theory. How do they add up to a politically viable form of communication? Rich isn't altogether clear on this point, and it may be because in the world she describes in *Chick Flicks*, everybody speaks the same language. Early in the book, she describes her escape from a lower-middle-class family where the notion of books and culture was limited to *Reader's Digest* condensed novels. She remade herself into a bohemian art chick, and apparently never looked back. But the world she left behind is still around, and nobody's making films for the women there.

To her credit, Rich's own work has been an ongoing effort to publicize, popularize and explain feminist film to a readership beyond academia. But that readership, after all, doesn't extend very

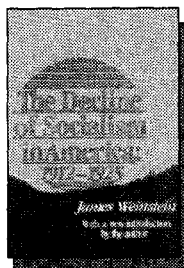
much beyond the ivory tower. And when she sees hope for the future of feminism in cultural studies and identity politics, I'm not really sure what political outcome she could possibly be hoping for—they're the same old divisive strategies in new garb. What's clearer is that she loves film and believes in its power to change lives—and in her own power to educate audiences about the films she loves.

I'm all for that, and for recovering a history that's largely been forgotten by all but those who lived it. But I'm less certain that feminist film can be revived as Rich hopes—or that it should be. The filmmakers Rich points to as proof that the feminist film is alive—such as Marleen Gorris, Sally Potter and Jane Campion—have themselves retreated entirely from the real-world concerns of contemporary female audiences. Enthralled with historical costume dramas and literary adaptations, they're largely producing postmodern *Masterpiece Theater* for enlightened boomers. Maybe a new generation of young female filmmakers, unburdened by the political quarrels of the past, will struggle to make movies about the women we never see on TV or in Hollywood. And maybe such films will have an audience just like the women up on the screen. Until then, you can start the revolution without me: ■

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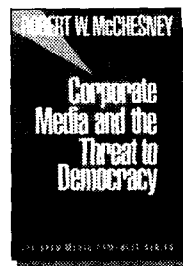
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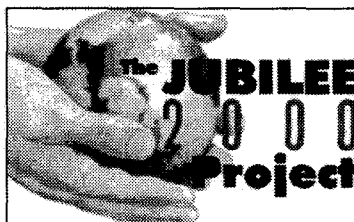
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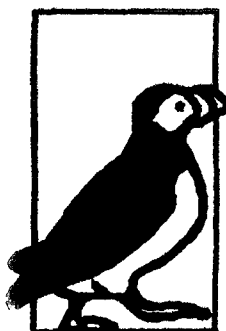
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Peerson, the "Puck Moses" who led the first boatload of Norwegian immigrants to the American prairie. And when Le Sueur writes about corn, the staple of Ojibway Indians and Scandinavian farmers, she has to describe the shucking technique of Ed Doggett, who once represented Freeborn County, Minnesota, at the National Corn Husking Contest, "a greater sport to watch than a Big Ten football game." To Le Sueur, that crop was the "Corn Mother," the seed from which the entire Midwest grew.

Le Sueur believed that a writer has to live among her material the way a farmer lives in his fields; she called her work "my life's crop." No writer with "distance," no one who hadn't felt the turning of season after season, could have come up with this description of summer-into-fall in the North Country:

The fine flesh of farm women smells of summer, of the hot kitchen. Then the harvesters come and there is the odor of sweet summer hay cooked in the blazing sun, of wheat chaff blowing sweet, corn standing tall, wind over the ripe fields and the smell of many kinds of ripeness, seed and the fruition before death.

*North Star Country* is a pastiche of songs, yarns, sketches and journalism. One chapter is a description of the Minnesota State Fair. The next, a history of the first white explorers. It's disorganized, impressionistic. She didn't believe in narrative or biography, at least in the way most historians do. Books in which a few great men drive the action forward were undemocratic, "like capitalism, the good distributed to a few favored players." The story of the *North Star Country* was the story of millions, so she tried to meet, and write about, as many as possible. Near the end of the book, Le Sueur marches with drivers in a Minneapolis trucking strike, then rides a milk train, where she meets a farm boy returning to his World War II submarine duty. They talk, and he rewards her with this poetic speech, one of dozens Le Sueur recorded in *North Star Country*:

'Lord,' he kept saying, along with some stronger language, 'that's the earth there under the snow. The sea's like a prairie sometimes on a still night, but the sea you can't get your spurs into. The prairies now, you can get your knees in. There she is—America!'

Le Sueur spent years away from the Midwest before she learned to see it so. She was born in 1900, in Iowa, and raised in St. Paul, the stepdaughter of a radical lawyer who

consorted with troublemakers in all shades of red—anarchists, socialists, Wobblies. Originally, she set out to be an actress, and went to Hollywood, but producers there thought her nose looked like a Jew's or an Indian's, and asked her to get it bobbed. She refused, and the only work she could get was as a stunt double. (Le Sueur's cousin, Lucille, was more successful, undergoing the necessary operation and changing her name to

Joan Crawford.)

After the falling out with L.A., she moved up the coast to San Francisco, where she worked as a waitress and factory worker and began writing short stories and articles for lefty publications like *Masses*.

Le Sueur's writing career was just taking off when the Depression hit, but like many other radical authors, she found the '30s "a good time to be a writer." She published her best known piece of journalism, "I Was Marching," an account of her participation in the Minneapolis truckers' strike, and wrote her only full-length novel, *The Girl*. Le Sueur collected material for that book by copying down the life stories of women she and her two daughters lived with in an abandoned warehouse.

It's hard to imagine an earthier writer than Le Sueur, or a more determined one. During the early '40s, she was still considered respectable enough for a Rockefeller Historical Research Fellowship, which

provided the cash to finish *North Star Country*. But after World War II, the bill for her left-wing beliefs came due: Publishers dropped her books from their backlists, and the FBI did whatever it could to prevent her from working. Boarders at a rooming house she ran were told their landlord was a subversive. Le Sueur tried teaching a correspondence writing course, but the bureau wrote harassing letters to her students. She was even fired from several waitressing jobs because of her red past.

Outside of a few articles in radical publications, her only writing then was a series of children's biographies about wholesome American heroes like Johnny Appleseed and Davy Crockett. But even with these, Le Sueur made a political—specifically a feminist—statement. One of the books is about Abraham Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks, a woman Le Sueur was distressed to see unmentioned on any monument to the president.

Le Sueur's writing never made her rich, or even gave her a secure income. To support herself in middle age, she sewed garments in a sweatshop and worked as an attendant in an insane asylum. In these years, she also became interested in the Indians of the Southwest, and lived in an abandoned bus



**Le Sueur believed that a writer has to live among her material the way a farmer lives in his fields.**

in Santa Fe so she could spend time with them. (The bus was also Le Sueur's favorite way to travel. She rode it to Kentucky to visit Lincoln's birthplace, to Washington to march against the Vietnam War. The close quarters and long trips gave her plenty of opportunity to talk with people.)

Le Sueur lived 96 years, long enough to become a heroine again. The women's movement that arose in the '60s saw her as a proto-feminist. She won a Wonder Woman Award from a group in New York, and spoke at a U.N. conference commemorating the Decade of the Woman.

Le Sueur was an early feminist, but the independent women she wrote about during the Depression were of a different order than today's college-educated career women, for whom living alone is a lifestyle choice, rather than a survival technique.

In her 1934 essay, "Women Are Hungry," Le Sueur distilled the hardscrabble philosophy of the hand-to-mouth women she knew in the Twin Cities: "Keep alone as much as you can, look out for yourself. Keep away from men and marriage, because there isn't anything in it for a girl but a horde of children to be left with. Lie low, get along, beg, borrow or steal, go a lone wolf's way."

Le Sueur went a lone wolf's way in the literary world, too. She wrote deep into her old age, but she published little new work after 1960, mainly because she had abandoned narrative—linear writing was a male art form, she thought—in favor of an "organic," feminine style that expressed the cyclical nature of the world, the interdependence of all living things. For years, she labored over an extended work called *The Origins of Corn*, a series of psalms to the mother food of the Midwest,

the kernel that to her was as important as the first atom of the universe. "American corn did not come from Europe or Asia," reads one fragment. "It is thought and flesh of the Americas, transmutation of communal love, Indian solidarity. Bountiful yields, rich protein, small and portable it could be carried by nation-building peoples, planted grown milled on new land, in a hole in the forest, migrant up the Mississippi, builder of new cities where wanderers could stop and because they had corn."

It's been eight years since I discovered *North Star Country*, and I haven't yet written my big book about the Midwest. But Le Sueur inspired me to take my notebook into places I would never have gone before: a "tent city" erected by the homeless on the lawn of the Michigan State Capitol; a neighborhood full of Southern-born auto workers in Flint, Michigan.; the headquarters of a striking union in Decatur, Illinois. So maybe I'm writing it in bits and pieces, deposited in little magazines and newspapers all over the region.

"I have waited for younger historians to continue this history of the people beyond the end of World War II," Le Sueur wrote 40 years after *North Star Country* was first published. Le Sueur never believed in endings, at least in writing. She knew she would end, but the people of the Midwest would go on and on after her death. Their story would have to be continued. There are hundreds of us working on that, I think. We're extending her work, a few words at a time. ■

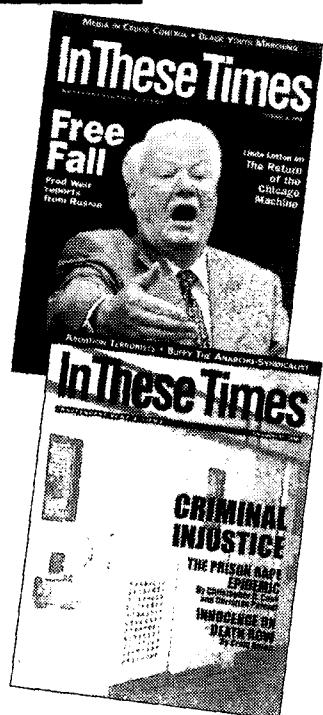
Ted Kleine lives in Chicago.

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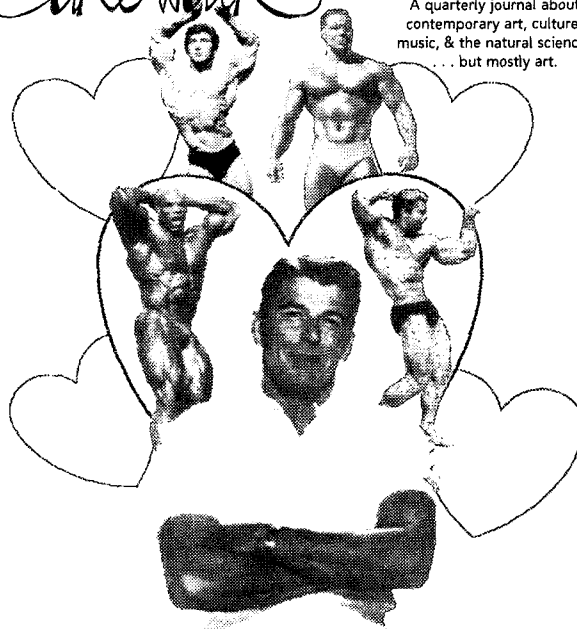
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# North Country Sage

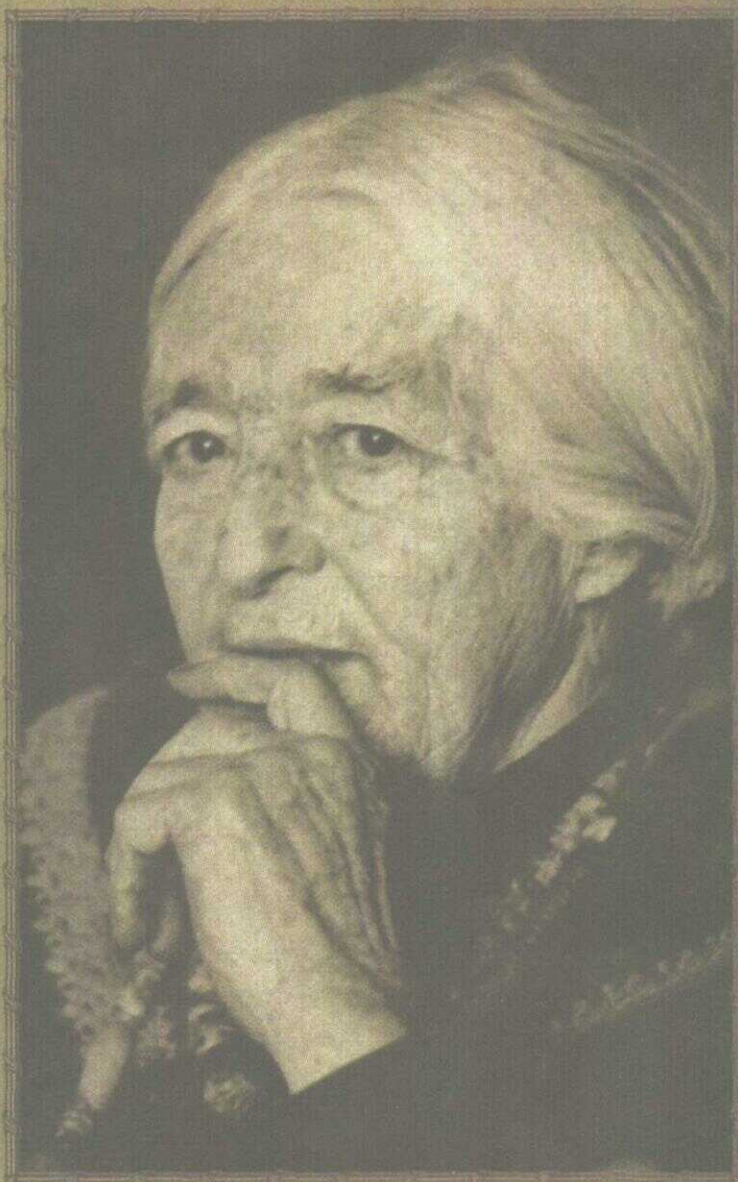
By Ted Kleine

When I was a kid, I used to have this premonition that I'd learn my purpose in life when I reached 27. I even had an image of The Moment in my head. It would be like watching a film of a shattering wine glass, run backwards. All the scattered shards would leap up off the floor, and the glass, whole again, would gleam as a symbol of the new life I was about to live.

The great revelation actually came when I was 23, but it felt exactly as I'd imagined it. I was living in San Francisco, 2,000 miles from my home in Michigan, and working as a file clerk in an accounting firm. One night as I was browsing in the basement of City Lights Bookstore, my homesick eye caught this title: *North Star Country* by Meridel Le Sueur. It was a history of the Upper Midwest, my turf, told in the voices of Indians, Grange farmers, housewives, striking laborers—all the folks who'd been left out of *The Oxford History of the American People*. The very first sentence, the invocation, was this Norwegian immigrant's prayer: "Should all things perish, fleeting as a shooting star / O God let not the ties break that bind me to the North." That, I realized, as I thought gloomily about the drizzly, snowless Pacific winter outside, could have been my nighttime prayer, too.

By the time I finished reading *North Star Country*, I knew what I wanted to do with my life. Four months later, I left San Francisco, which I figured had too many *litterateurs* anyway, and moved back to Michigan, hoping to write a book on the "modern folkways" of the Upper Midwest: deer hunting in November, high school hockey tournaments, apple cider mills, ice fishing shanties and all the other little customs that made us different from the rest of America.

*North Star Country*, the book that inspired this pipe dream of mine, was originally published in 1945, as part of the American Folkways series, which was edited by Erskine Caldwell and also included such volumes as *Mormon Country* by Wallace Stegner and *Golden Gate Country* by long-forgotten Gertrude Atherton. It lapsed out of print soon after I discovered it, and when Le Sueur died two years ago, I figured it was gone forever. But *North Star Country*, the best nonfiction book ever written about the Midwest, is alive again, reissued this past fall by the University of Minnesota Press.



Its author, Meridel Le Sueur, was one of those Depression-era "proletarian" writers, like Nelson Algren and Richard Wright, who got their training working for the Federal Writers Project, and ever afterwards went into the city streets and the small towns to look for material. As a member of the Minnesota project, Le Sueur was given the task of traveling around the state, recording folk sayings. Years later, when she got the commission for *North Star Country*, she decided to use her collection of tales and proverbs as the basis of a new kind of book: a biography of a people that blurred the lines between fiction and history, sociology and folklore. The explorers, generals and governors who dominate most history books were given cameos, but *North Star Country* was, at its root, "a history of the people of the Midwest, told from their dimensions in their language."

In Le Sueur's book, the commonest settler was given the mythic dimensions of a Bunyan or an Appleseed. There are no statistics on immigration or agriculture in *North Star Country*. But there is a sketch of the footloose sailor Cleng

*Continued on page 28*