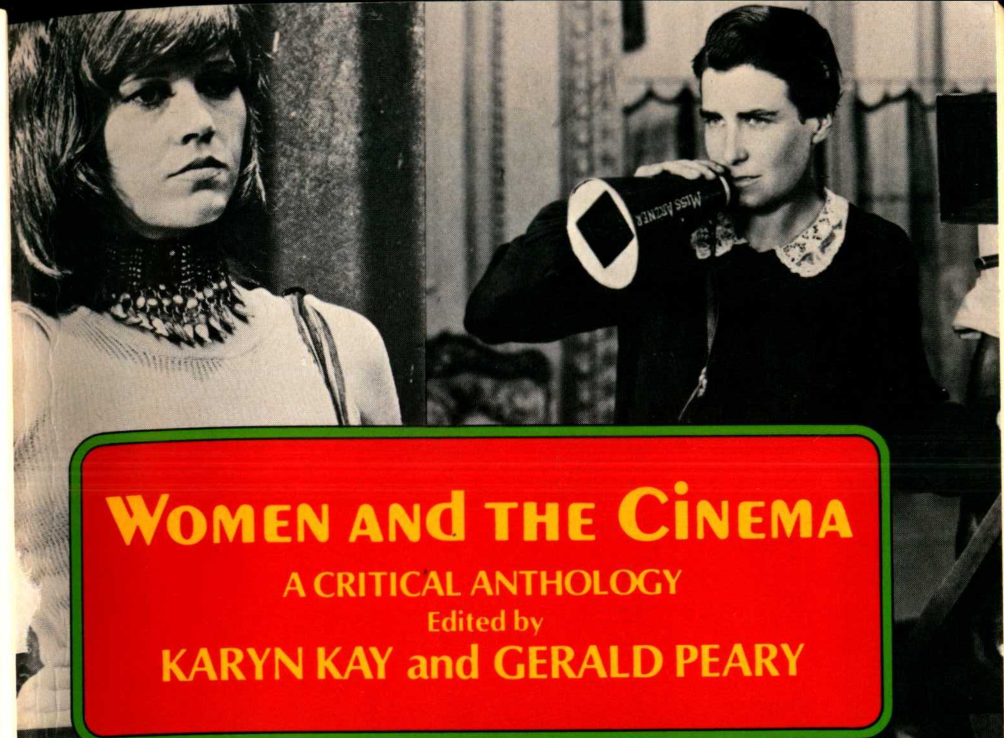

WOMEN AND THE CINEMA

A CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY

Edited by

KARYN KAY and GERALD PEARY

about *Meshes* as being a point of departure. Each film was built as a chamber and became a corridor, like a chain reaction.

You know those puzzle games where, if you draw a continuous line from one point to another, consecutively numbered, you end up with a picture? Well, in this letter, I finally drew those points and got a picture.

Last May I had an emergency operation; it was touch and go for a few hours there, and I came out of it with a rapidity that dazzled: one month from the date of that operation (I had to be slit from side to side) I was dancing! Then I actually realized that I was overwhelmed with the most wondrous gratitude for the marvelous persistence of the life force. In the transported exaltation of this moment, I wanted to run out into the streets and shout out to everyone that death was not true! that they must not listen to the doom singers and the bell ringers! that life was more true! I had always believed and felt this, but never had I known how right I was. And I asked myself, why, then, did I not celebrate it in my art. And then I had a sudden image: a dog lying somewhere very still, and a child, first looking at it, and then, compulsively, nudging it. Why? to see whether it was alive; because if it moves, if it can move, it lives. This most primitive, this most instinctive of all gestures: to make it move to make it live. So I had always been doing with my camera, nudging an ever-increasing area of the world, making it move, animating it, making it live. This is part of the picture. *Meshes* is the warmest of my films; *The Very Eye of Night* is the coolest, the most classicist. Or so it seems, on an emotional, intimate, level. But the love of life itself, in *The Very Eye of Night*, seems to me larger than the loving attention to *a* life. But, of course, each contains the other, and, perhaps, I have not so much traveled off in a direction, as moved in a slow spiral around some central essence, seeing it first from below and now, finally, from above.

Anyway, this is one way to look at that reel of films. You can't say you haven't been briefed! . . .

My very best wishes,
Maya Deren

A Conversation*

Storm De Hirsch and Shirley Clarke

INTRODUCTION

The eye of the women's movement has yet to notice talented Storm De Hirsch, veteran experimentalist. A typical concoction from her repertoire is Shaman, a Tapestry for Sorcerers *(1966), described fancifully by the filmmaker: "For the magic makers of the world, those who enter the atlas of the soul and rummage through the refuse and flowers of time to weave a talisman for man's rebirth in his house of breath." Her little-known narrative work,* Goodbye in the Mirror *(1964), is perhaps the first full-length American independent film of directly feminist interest. De Hirsch tells the story of three single women who share a Rome apartment. According to Jeanne Betancourt in* Women in Focus, *"It sets forth Maria's conflicts with her roommates, her hunt for a man, and her ultimate decision to refuse her knight in shining armor."* Goodbye in the Mirror *is ripe for revival. Since 1974 Storm De Hirsch has been experimenting with super 8, creating ciné-sonnets from her own poetry.*

Shirley Clarke became a cause célèbre with The Connection, *her 1960 screen version of Jack Gelber's junkie play. In 1963 she made*

* Abridged from *Film Culture*, no. 46 (Autumn 1967) (published October 1968). Reprinted by permission of Jonas Mekas.

the even more successful The Cool World, *shot on the streets of Harlem. In 1967 she released her third and last feature,* Portrait of Jason. *For years, Shirley Clarke was looked to as the woman who would crack Hollywood. However her Chelsea Hotel nonconformity never quite led her onto the industry payroll. Her one artist's sojourn to Los Angeles was to star as herself in Agnes Varda's raggedy ann and anti-Hollywood* Lion's Love (1969). *In recent years Shirley Clarke has moved from film to video, where she can be a true independent.*

Note that this conversation, mostly about women filmmakers, occurred ten years ago. Clarke and De Hirsch were typically ahead of their time.

STORM DE HIRSCH: What about lady taxi drivers?

SHIRLEY CLARKE: When I see them I still smile and say, what's going on, what is this chick up to? There's something to me strange about her. Now my conditioning—and, of course, it must seem awfully silly to hear me say that—I think this is silly when I work in a so-called masculine field, but it never occurred to me that I worked in a masculine field because of how I got in, in that I was a dancer and started making dance films on a very personal basis. It never occurred to me that masculinity and femininity and being in a field called filmmaking was not what I thought I was doing. I was making dance films. Only as it progressed, I started to become aware that I was a woman doing something that most other women weren't doing or in a field, rather, that had very few women.

SDH: Maybe it's better that it took that natural sequence . . .

SC: Well, in your case it's true also. In other words, you started as a poet and a painter and you extended your work into film.

SDH: Yes. But to me, making poems and making films are one, and neither activity excludes the other. My way of getting into films was simply by association, by knowing so many filmmakers, sitting and discussing with them and wondering what in hell they were making such a big fuss about. I found myself walking around and observing things and I found myself writing a script, and I also found that I was being very secretive about it because there was a

kind of embarrassment about it. The following year when I went to Rome, I completed the script and I kept hiding it, but several people eventually saw it and that was the way I made the film. But it was sort of ridiculous in a way, because to make a feature film as my first film [*Goodbye in the Mirror*, 1964] is the most idiotic and foolish thing anybody would ever conceive of, except that it was in sheer ignorance.

SC: . . . I know that I had decided to make dance films because I had seen a bunch of dance films and I thought they were just awful, and it occurred to me that really you had to be an idiot not to be able to make a good dance film—what was so tough about it? And I went into it thinking, really, this is going to be quite a simple thing to do and that it was just the fact that the wrong people had been doing it—people who didn't know anything really about dance and that, since I knew about dance, I would learn about this rather simple thing called film and do it. I must say that certain successes I had and certain failures were very basic flaws in a lot of thinking that's been done and that I was doing, and that it wasn't that easy. The fact that I never realized was that one art destroyed another.

SDH: Well, do you really think so?

SC: Well, I think that if you're going to think of doing a dance film and taking already existing dance and transferring it onto film—you will destroy that dance. That does not mean though that you cannot make a dance for film and it was this that I finally learned and that this was the mistake that had been made until then.

SDH: But then you did feel—it did evolve to a point where you didn't feel it necessary to do just dance film.

SC: No. Well, that's because the medium of film became much more intriguing and exciting than just dance, in terms of action and passivity. Dance for me started to be too limited. There were too many other things that danced.

SDH: But you know, Shirley, . . . here we are, two "quote-unquote" lady filmmakers. We're talking, I assume, objectively—like any filmmaker. I mean, what is the distinction here? We both operate differently. We have a different approach to our work. We have different concepts or goals, what we want to attain visually. What is

it, then, that would make this distinction in terms of are-you-a-lady-filmmaker-or-are-you-an-artist?

SC: Well, now, let's ask another question. Is there a difference, let's say, in lady and men writers?—these days? Let's not talk about the past, because that's another time and another world. But in our world today, if people didn't sign their names to things they wrote, would you be able to say this was written by a man, this was written by a woman?

SDH: Well, I tell you, I'm in a peculiar position. I'd like to get a little personal about it. That is, because my name is Storm.

SC: That's right—everybody thinks you're a man.

SDH: I don't know, maybe this is all a myth that has to be broken at some time, because I have had the experience of sending manuscripts to magazine editors and gotten back—usually rejections—but with a note enclosed saying, "Dear Mr. Storm (De Hirsch) we are sorry . . ." but going into a very respectful kind of analysis of what it is they want, if I would revise it thus and so, et cetera, because fundamentally, they like the idea or they like the images or something. When they accept me, sometimes I've been very suspicious that I have been accepted sheerly as a Mr. (outside of the fact that I may think they have good taste)—that same good taste somehow evaporates when it is Miss Storm.

SC: Right on this issue of whether you know if it's a man or a woman—because there are attitudes—chauvinism exists—we're just kidding ourselves if we think it doesn't. . . . One of the things that exists about the difference of reading a woman writer and a man writer, if you didn't know, would be in terms of subjectivity. In other words, if one's writing is extremely subjective writing, certainly it would be noticeable if someone was a man or a woman. Do you think that women tend to be more subjective than men anyway? In other words, this whole problem that I think De Beauvoir brought up as clearly and as well as anybody—the need for men to be transcendental because they do not have within them the reproductive capacity in the same way that women do.

SDH: I think it's questionable as to whether the biological structure makes that much difference in terms of art. I have my own little theories about this, and I feel that when it comes to art, there's

a question of soul, of the inner world, that's a universal thing; and I feel that the soul is neither male nor female. When I work and get involved with filmmaking, especially in my animation, I become both man and woman or either one. It isn't a sexlessness, but rather an awareness of the sexuality involved.

SC: But isn't that inner world Storm De Hirsch's soul, which has been influenced by having been a woman?—All your life? Now we're all everything. To begin with, none of us is only masculine or only feminine. This we have finally learned. But I'm thinking now in terms of looking at your work or my work—now I don't know why I knew that you were a woman right from the beginning. Somehow I did.

SDH: That's interesting—because generally, the reaction is just the opposite.

SC: Well, for some reason, either I had already been told—but the thing that struck me is that you can take your work, you can take mine, and in many cases the subjects are neither-sexed. Certainly in animation, it's not sexed per se. A film like *The Cool World* [1962] is not masculine or feminine. Yet, I would bet my bottom dollar a man doing any of these films would have done it differently.

SDH: Well, he may have done it differently—but I think . . .

SC: But maybe it's only because he's a different person.

SDH: Both films—I think both *The Connection* [1960] and *The Cool World* are very powerful films and they have a sense of violence and they have a large sense of strength which, if one didn't know, they would unquestionably be identified by most people as the work of a man.

SC: And yet to me, it's an endless giveaway in both those films and in the one I'm just doing, that is, what I would consider a feminine way of looking at something. In other words, one of the fights that I've always battled against—and this is very interesting that you brought up the very crux of it, which is violence—in other words, violence personally, to me, is extremely repugnant. It's something I'm terribly afraid of. And yet, I'm obviously very attracted to it, because I am always doing it and I'm always making films that seem outwardly to have nothing to do with me, me as (let's say) anyone who knows me in my own personal life. They have to do

with me because they attract me, and what is it about them that's attracting me and making me want to get involved in these kinds of things? Isn't it in an odd way my very femininity making this attractive to me? Why do I like violence?

SDH: In this case, we're similar, because my writing has always had a sense of violence about it, and what I've done so far in film has a related sense of violence.

SC: But don't you think that in a strange way, this is stronger? In other words, the way we react to violence is quite different from a man. For instance, you and I are not used to being hit and we don't hit people physically. Women don't do this.

SDH: No, I find this very repugnant also.

SC: As far as I know, punching someone back and forth is not a female way of reacting to a fight. We might scream and yell.

SDH: Just as I do agree that all or most women are antiwar.

SC: There is just something in it, that violence is repugnant, and it's also obviously attractive to us. Now maybe this is a sexual thing that makes it attractive. Whatever reason it is, when we deal with violence, we are certainly going to do it differently from a man who is not afraid. Most men have had experiences in their life of being knocked down. I've never been knocked out by anybody in my life—I never expect to be, except under some really weird fluke. And I'm sure that the same thing is true with you, so that the whole way we would deal with violence would definitely have to be different, because it would come through a very different sensitivity that we have. All I'm really trying to say is that women really do have certain sensitivities that are different and this is not the soul that's different. Even with the admitting that the human being's soul is neither masculine nor feminine, you go to the next layer and then you have to say, but there is something that's different between men and women that is psychobiological . . .

SDH: It depends on what level you're working on . . .

SC: And that it shows up. Now, for instance, just offhand—and I'm not even talking about whether I like or don't like other women filmmakers' films—but offhand, thinking of Mai Zetterling's films and Varda's films, one of the things that I particularly noticed in them is again violence, and a kind of concern with sexual violence.

Jason Holliday, the voluble star of Shirley Clarke's *A Portrait of Jason* (1967). (Courtesy Film-Makers Distribution Center)

SDH: But you also understand that a man—I'm sure you've seen films, even commercial Hollywood films, where there's a male director who handles situations with tremendous sensitivity. I remember, for some reason it comes to mind, about *East of Eden* [1955] that was directed by Kazan, I thought there were sequences there with Jimmy Dean that were some of the most beautiful structures of sensitivity that I have ever experienced in my life. I must say like a woman, if one puts it in those terms, I just sat there and cried. There was a lyrical quality there which . . .

SC: But he was still dealing with a man, and I have a feeling that up to this point the only person so far who's done a real woman's film has been your *Goodbye in the Mirror*. In other words, for some reason, even so far, women filmmakers have yet to deal with the subject of women. That usually, for instance, Varda's heroes are men. Her women may or may not be what brings them to their salvation, or whatever. In Zetterling's film, the women may be the enemy or the devil or the one who gets everything going. But so far in film, we have yet to have treated, on the most basic level, very personal reactions of women. Because so far, we've had mostly men directors who, whether they've been very sensitive or not, have not really been able to deal with women this way. Just like when they

write about women, they're writing from a certain separateness. *Goodbye in the Mirror* is dealing with women. And women's reactions to a series of events. That has not been true of *The Cool World* or *The Connection* or—and it's something I must say, that I not only admire you for, but I'm jealous that you have been able to do it because I wish I had been able to do it.

SDH: Well, you probably will at some time. If you already have that kind of motivation. Of course, I've been accused of being very unkind to women—this attitude of, well, you are a woman, you must hate women to have made the heroine so ugly, which I didn't think she was—I thought she had a bold and sensual kind of beauty.

SC: But who's talking to you? Are women telling you this, or are men telling you?

SDH: I don't remember, but one of them was a man . . .

SC: If we're going to use you and I as examples, and one or two other women filmmakers, I don't think we can point our finger and say, yes, women are making films that are different—because I don't think we are. But I have a sort of feeling that maybe we should be and that maybe we will as we get more secure in the medium. All I mean is that it takes a lot of musicians to make Beethoven, and it's going to take a lot of filmmakers to make great films, and we are merely part of something that ten years from now, twenty years, fifty years from now, won't even be discussed anymore. It will be actually a ridiculous discussion to discuss men and women filmmakers in the future, because it will be just such a common thing. At this point, it's still not common.

SDH: You do feel that the time will come when there will not be the labeling?

SC: Yes. I don't think there will be labeling. I don't think anybody's going to be concerned. I think you're more bothered by that. To me, it would be very nice if there would be something called femininity, although I'm not quite sure what the hell that is, but I know there's a difference between men and women and this is going to be revealed in our work as artists, filmmakers, and that this is going to be good. This is going to be a contribution of sensitivity and perception that is beyond what we've got right now. Now I

have read your poems and I have seen your films and I've seen some of your paintings and to me, you are always exploring your femininity. I mean, I think that's very much what they are about.

SDH: I regard this as a compliment.

SC: I mean it as one. To me, this is a goal, and if I could articulate what I would like for myself in the future, it would be to find that in me that is feminine. I have found that in me that is like everyone else or that is even the masculine part of myself, but I've had a much more difficult time finding the feminine part. . . .

SC: You must have had the experience that I had, with this festival-going. My film may be discussed, but invariably I am described physically in the review. Now, what in the world my looks have got to do with a review of the film—and yet . . .

SDH: Well, that's the journalistic approach.

SC: Invariably this is true when it's a woman film director. And it's never discussed—I've no idea what most men filmmakers look like from reading reviews. If I've met them, fine, otherwise I really wouldn't know. Yet I can tell you what every woman who's making films looks like—size, shape, her coloring. They are described that way. . . . You know what I've gotten that's always somewhat puzzled me—let's say I'm brought in and introduced to someone who has seen my work and has heard about me, but has never met me, and I will often get a comment like, "Oh, I didn't expect you to look like you do—you're so little." What do they expect, some amazon? That's exactly what they expect. They expect some gal about eight feet tall with big husky muscles who obviously is going to be able to cart a lot of things around, and they're immediately shocked by how small I am; and it's an endless comment that I've gotten and that level of patronage I've had.

SDH: We are both little women . . .

SC: Right. So it's always, I guess, something of a surprise in terms of, let's say, discussing my work. I've always felt this and maybe this is my own problem—but that my work has never been taken as seriously as it might have been had I been a man. But I feel this on a very broad basis; I feel this almost totally. I really mean this. I feel this from the most commercial levels to the most artistic level. That

I am not dealt with as seriously as I'd like to be, and I question whether it's my work or whether it's my sex that has produced this kind of reaction. . . . I remember the first day I was on the set of *The Connection,* which was a union-made film with an all-man union crew, and basically a male cast. The script girl, the wardrobe mistress was a girl, and outside of that, that was the end of the female part of it. I know that the first couple of days there was a self-consciousness on everyone's part.

SDH: Do you feel the self-consciousness was due to the fact that you were a woman?

SC: Well, there were two reasons. One, that I was unknown. In other words, who was this person? let alone who was this crazy girl that had the nerve to want to direct a feature film? It was eliminated in two ways. One, as soon as I revealed that my language was as foul as everyone else's . . .

SDH: You mean it was "un-ladylike."

SC: Yes. Apparently, we didn't have to worry about the words that were going to be said on the set. And secondly, when they realized I knew what I was doing. And it took a few days for everyone to say, it's just Shirley and it couldn't be anyone else. You know, the night before I went on the set, as I went to bed that night, I said to myself, you have to be out of your mind to think that you're going to show up tomorrow and sit and direct a film. You must be crazy. That's some nerve getting all these people involved.

SDH: Well, you weren't the only one that thought that way. I did, too. I'd sit there and say, who the hell talked me into this?

SC: Yes, right. And here are all these people and you know filmmaking does involve lots of people sitting and waiting—all right now, you're supposed to say something and you know—go—and there you are kind of with your tongue hanging out. I'm sure you did exactly what I did, which was I just went. And after going, we all learned that we could go, that you could walk and it wasn't all that horrible, and after the first week it was fun. The first week was not fun.

SDH: Well, my experience was similar and, although I was accepted in a position of authority, I noticed that the second day on location the three girls in the cast had gotten into a huddle, looking

at me and whispering. I knew two of the British girls were curious about something. They told me later they had found it strange that I was wearing a dress. The first day I had worn slacks and this they took to because it was in character for them. I guess that was it—the male identification. But whenever I wore a dress, I noticed that there was a kind of change in the weather. . . .

SDH: The thought just occurred to me that since we're talking about females and femininity—I wondered what advantages there are to being feminine in terms of, let's say, producers, getting money for film: do you think this is utilized . . .

SC: Well, I must be honest—I never have been successful that way. This has always bothered me. I've always thought that one should use the feminine wiles to con people out of money. Frankly, I've never found that being very successful. Usually, I make people more secure by behaving more abstractly than if I try to come on cute and so forth. On the other hand, there are certain things I've gotten as a result of being a woman and using the feminine wiles—physical things, like people helping me, which—let's say, I'm going to lift something heavy and there's a man around, he'll help me and obviously, with a man they wouldn't get that sort of thing. Also, people being a little bit more generous in terms of lending things to me, or making it possible for me to do a certain kind of work and in an odd way, partly because they don't take me quite seriously. Oddly enough, I'm not competitive with them. In other words, they don't think of me as a competitor, which can be very helpful.

SDH: You mean for the moment, you don't mind that; in other circumstances, you might.

SC: If someone will help me because they don't take me that seriously, I'll let them flounder around if I get something I need and want.

SDH: I've sometimes gotten things done as a result of making my needs known. But getting myself to ask for assistance is something I find difficult to do.

SC: Have you gotten money from people because you were a woman?

SDH: That's hard to say. I think, in certain instances, yes. I like

to think that. But I don't know, because it doesn't happen all the time. If it happened all the time, then I would have the statistical guarantee that this works to advantage in that sense. But I was thinking also of the role of the male director who becomes a heroic figure, and thinking of what you said about women filmmakers not being taken that seriously. I mean, to be a male director—even on a small scale—becomes a very glamorous kind of occupation; but with the woman, oddly enough, being an actress holds a great deal more glamour, even though she may have a very small part, than the position of being a female director. On the other hand, there's an indulgence toward the female which sometimes works to a very great advantage in terms of getting things done.

SC: Do you think it's slightly a disgrace to be a woman film director?

SDH: This depends on the eyes of the beholder.

SC: Haven't you noticed that labs, for instance, are very friendly with you—they immediately call you by your first name. I mean, I'm always "Shirley" to everybody.

SDH: I haven't had quite that experience; but that might have been because of my own attitude in coming in.

SC: I pick up the phone and I say, this is Shirley Clarke and I'd like to know how much it costs to print such-and-such. "Well, Shirley, it's . . ." I mean, immediately. Now, I'm pretty sure that this is not what is done with the average man. Since it happens to be an attitude that they have, then women should use it, because actually, it's better if people don't take you completely seriously. Strangely enough, they are more agreeable and more willing to do things for you than if they are afraid of you. And if they're not afraid of you because they don't take you seriously, you know what you're doing yourself—that's still your business. If your goal is a certain goal, you go right ahead getting it, and let them think whatever they want.

On Yoko Ono*

Yoko Ono

October 1968

on *Film No. 4, 1967* (in taking the bottoms of 365 saints of our time)

I wonder why men can get serious at all. They have this delicate long thing hanging outside their bodies, which goes up and down by its own will. First of all having it outside your body is terribly dangerous. If I were a man, I would have a fantastic castration complex to the point that I wouldn't be able to do a thing. Second, the inconsistency of it, like carrying a chance time alarm or something. If I were a man, I would always be laughing at myself. Humor is probably something the male of the species discovered through their own anatomy. But men are so serious. Why? Why violence? Why hatred? Why war? If people want to make war, they should make a color war, and paint each other's city up during the night in pinks and greens. Men have an unusual talent for making a bore out of everything they touch. Art, painting, sculpture, like who wants a cast-iron woman, for instance.

The film world is becoming terribly aristocratic, too. It's professionalism all the way down the line. In any other field: painting,

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