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**Chick Strand's *Soft Fiction*:
An Observation of Experience**

Bridget Shaffrey

In the classic film narrative, “the ideological meaning that woman has is for men. In relation to herself, she means nothing. Women are negatively represented as ‘not-man.’ The ‘woman-as-woman’ is absent from the text of the film.”¹ Reduced under the voyeuristic male gaze, women tend to be viewed not as independent beings with independent experiences, but as tools used to understand the expression of man. Classic cinema constructs a particular ideological view of the female reality and aspects of the female experience, such as sexuality, emotion, and memory, are confined within and explored in reaction to the male psyche; women become object, not the person. However, there is opposition. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, tackling scopophilia, argued against the role of women in the classic cinematic function, instead advocating for a “feminist counter cinema.”² Characteristically avant-garde, feminist cinema should “free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment” (26). Chick Strand’s *Soft Fiction* encompasses the rise of feminist narratives delineating women from the masculine center and therefore “freeing” women in cinema. *Soft Fiction* focuses on “women-as-women” specifically, what shapes women. Confronting and subverting the viewer’s visual pleasure,

Strand uses multiple genres, themes, and cinematography to provoke the audience to question and challenge their voyeuristic-scopophilic gaze of women in cinema.

Strand works to critique static views of women by presenting multiple cinematic perspectives thereby effectively deconstructing the single fetishistic voyeuristic view of a woman on screen. “Castrating” the linear, single narrative structure, *Soft Fiction* violates conventional cinematic codes by evoking genres rather than a single genre, multiple women rather than a single woman, and evoking differing, and often times conflicting, themes and messages that radicalize female subjectivity. Allowing the range of topics explored in the film to reach from positive to negative, exhilarating to traumatizing, each topic and person illustrated within that topic gives an intense and intimate insight into the historical, cultural, emotional, and sexual aspects of being a woman. Describing *Soft Fiction*, Paula Rabinowitz analyzes the film, stating:

Chick Strand’s *Soft Fiction* recirculates many of the clichés about women’s erotic and sexual fantasies within its visual and sound tracks. Bring to focus questions about the range of female sexuality and fantasy, the modes of female address, the genre(s) of women’s stories, the form the female body as visual spectacle and narrative subject, *Soft Fiction* dwells between the borders of ethnography, documentary, pornography, avant-garde and feminist counter-cinema.³

Rabinowitz touches upon the dynamics at play in the film. Specifically, Rabinowitz notes the multiple genres at play. To argue that *Soft Fiction* conforms to any single form is too derivative and simplistic, Rabinowitz' review illustrates the film's refusal to be a representative of one genre. Operating in a feminist theoretical discourse, the film advocates for multiple forms as a portrayal of the dynamic and fluid experience of femininity as opposed to the single, rigid, and suffocating structure that currently constructs the ideological image of woman.

Rabinowitz uses the scene of a nude, young woman making herself breakfast as an example of the subversive intersection of genres. Stating that this combination of the pornographic and the documentary explores the baseness of womanhood, in this scene, the indication of blatant sexuality, or exposure in the woman's nudity. However, Strand portrays the woman not as naked, but as natural. While appearing to offer the woman to a voyeuristic gaze, the woman's actions are not arousing, but powerfully human. Because the woman is naked, in a classical function, she should exist as an object of desire, however, she instead makes her breakfast, cracks eggs, cleans up; the woman is riddling the spectator's gaze by conflicting her sexual presentation. Strand continues this subversion with non-diegetic sound; Strand keys a background narration explaining the sexual abuse the young woman faced as a child at the hands of her grandfather and how her exposure and trust in him has shaped her psyche. The woman states when describing the experience, "It scared me—it was too close and too strong... I just

wouldn't allow myself to be alone with him—jump out of bed, feign sleep, all the typical tactics of female avoidance—I learned them young—now I'm a master. Pursued and captured, really captured cause there's no way out."⁴ Sex, therefore, does not yield a surplus of pleasure, but operates traumatically, evoking the woman as a symbol of resilience and experience and helping the audience understand the challenges women face.

This scene highlights the tendency for women in *Soft Fiction* to become “exposed” to the penetrating camera. However, this exposure works as a discursive agent, instead using exposure as a method of understanding an oppositional form of spectatorship. Objective exposure is reconstructed into discursive sexual exploration. This reconstruction is suggested in a passage from Marsha Kinder's review of *Soft Fiction* in *Film Quarterly*, “Although the content of these stories could mark these women as victims the amazing thing is that all emerge as strong survivors—partly because of the way they perceive, interpret and recreate the experiences for the camera.”⁵ Kinder articulates that Strand focuses her camera on the subtle expressions of the women's actions and words. Her camera placement, choices in lighting, and the framing all work to focus the audience's attention on the subtlety of emotion while simultaneously deconstructing the voyeuristic, placing themselves in a position of discomfort, and exposing themselves to female reality.

Strand documents the exploration of exposure through multiple perceptions and interpretations; some of the film's scenes focus on the abuse of sexuality, some

of it focuses on female enjoyment. However, the message conveyed by both types of scenes is the same: females are not sexual objects, but sex is part of the female experience. This is exemplified in Strand's scene interviewing a photographer in which, the photographer recounts the sexual encounter she had with one of her interviewees, a cowboy. This scene is about deconstructing the shame that women innately feel about having sexual desires while simultaneously analyzing the power dynamic of hetero-normative relationships. Rabinowitz states:

In this story, Strand and her informant manipulate one of the privileged scenes of hard-core porn, the blow job, evoking visceral reactions from the audience members about the woman's status as a "victim"...sexuality in a woman always resulted in shame and punishment. But in *Soft Fiction*, the photographer returns to her pleasure and her power (Rabinowitz, 106).

Through this exploration of a woman's sexual pleasure, Strand explores a woman's enjoyment of sex independent of the standard. Rabinowitz, in her review, notes that this scene presents a resistance to the social standard of understanding a woman's sexuality through a specific, patriarchal sense.

With regard to the audience's spectatorship, the relationship that the audience forms with the women displaces the patriarchal gazes. Chick Strand articulates "the most incredible part of making the film was my relationship to the women when they were talking and

being on camera, and doing it knowing the result, knowing that they would be on this big screen and a lot of people, strangers, would see them. Them telling it on camera acted as an exorcism.”⁶ In this way, the audience begins to know each woman not as an object but as a person. They become not only images on a screen, but embodiments of feminine practice.

Elements of all documentary have issue with finding the correct way to capture “truth” without idealizing reality. According to Annette Smelik paraphrasing Claire Johnston, “Feminist documentary should manufacture and construct the ‘truth’ or women’s oppression, not merely reflect it.”⁷ Containing elements of documentary, *Soft Fiction* enters this realm of criticism. Particularly, the intimacy between each woman and the audience raises questions: how much are the women performing and how much is their perceived performance just careful editing? Therefore, can the audience explore the themes and the messages authentically if some scenes are merely performances? Marsha Kinder addresses these questions,

The title *Soft Fiction* works on several levels. It evokes the soft line between truth and fiction that characterizes Strand’s own approach to documentary... Presumably these stories are true, and yet the style of delivery, the tone of voice, the structure of the narrative all raise questions in our minds about how the material has been reworked, revised, or censored for an audience (50).

Kinder points out that in the film's attempt to focus on emotion and the trials of life, it has the potential to raise questions about authenticity and focus. Questioning whether the film is truly subversive, many argue that while films such as *Soft Fiction* claim to oppose the patriarchal gaze, they instead perpetuate it by negotiating it through whiteness. Jane Chapman, a critic of contemporary media, questions Strand's authenticity and white focus:

She avoids the exotic other and the colonial relationship by looking at her own culture of white, middle-class film artists so that women can tell their own story to their friend in her home, and decide how they will be framed and how they will perform for the camera. But this creates other tensions: is the film merely narcissism masquerading as ethnography? Narcissistic elements within representation raise another question: the presence of performance inevitable?⁸

Chapman raises serious questions about the racial hierarchies and racial neglect by white, feminist filmmakers. However, while Strand undeniably denies the voice of women of color, her film is still undeniably authentic. The presence of performance cited by Chapman undermines Strand's awareness of her cinematic experiments and stylized production. Chick Strand states in an interview with Kate Haug, "I like a lot of movement. I like to make my own special effects. I like to put the viewer in a position they would never be in: really close in, for a length of time, like they're

flitting around the feet of the dancers” (Haug, 117). We can see that Strand is motivated by what she deems important in terms of viewing. Maybe the performance and authenticity of the film are not necessarily the questions, but the answers to its foundation. What does it mean to be female? Is not all femininity a performance? According to Judith Butler, not only is femininity a performance, but all gender: “gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.”⁹ Thus, to dictate what constitutes a performance and what constitutes reality is difficult to dissect as reality is arguably a performance. Can anything be completely authentic with a camera in the room? Do we not become more aware of our existence when art, film, or literature draw our attention to it? One could argue that a degree of performance goes into many scenes in *Soft Fiction*, such as the homage to Maya Daren at the beginning of the film. However, scenes such as the woman recounting her addictions to drugs and love or of the woman’s account of the Nazis are clearly, deeply authentic and direct. It is not that the audience should not question the reality of the film, but how can one dictate how another should feel or react to experiences without living through those experiences ourselves?

This is the line that Chick Strand pushes. Regardless of the validity of her stories, she interprets her footage as the overwhelming sanctity of a woman’s experience: good or bad. This takes us back to her point that the experiences of women are universally ignored both on camera and in society. In her interview with Kate Haug, Strand states, “[*Soft Fiction*] is a film about women who

win...What I mean by winning is that they don't become victims, and they don't become survivors. They carry on. They take responsibility for having had the experience and carrying it off and dealing with it and carrying on and becoming more potent, more powerful, more of themselves" (114). This self-awareness is not the goal for just the women in the film, but for the audience as a whole. Cinema reduces the woman to an object. But, by simultaneously being a film of feminist opposition and forcing the audience members to question the existence and experiences of these women, members of the audience begin to understand the larger framework at play. While she simultaneously ignores the experiences of race, this should not exclude her from attempting to engage in feminist discourse. No film is without its faults, but if it is inherently working to remedy some intrinsic lack of society, should we discount its merit as a discursive tool? Instead, the viewer should recognize this and then further aim to amend those faults.

In conclusion, *Soft Fiction* raises important questions about the problematic view of women in both cinema and society. What does the film say about existing within a culture dominated by what women are *supposed* to feel and *meant* to do but not how they actually feel and actually do? Furthermore, the film asks the question: who are these women and why should I make a connection with them? What purpose does this film serve me? When asked these questions, the viewer might remember Chick Strand's pertinent observation

“I have no idea what my films mean when I’m doing them. That is boring to me to figure out...If I knew what the meaning was, there would be no reason to do it” (Haug, 110).

Notes

1. Anneke Smelik, *And The Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 9.
2. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"(1975), in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 26.
3. Paula, Rabinowitz, "Soft Fictions and Intimate Documents: Can Feminism Be Posthuman?" in *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Judith Halberstam and Iva Livingston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 106.
4. Chick Strand, *Soft Fiction*, 64mm print, (1979; Burbank: Supercine, 1994)
5. Marsha Kinder, "Soft Fiction," *Film Quarterly*, 33: 3 (Spring, 1980): 50.
6. Kate Haug, "An Interview with Chick Strand," *Wide Angle Femme Experimentale*, 20: 1 (1998), 107.
7. Annette Smelik, "Feminist Film Theory," in *The Cinema Book*, eds. Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink, (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 493.
8. Jane Chapman and Kate Allison, *Issues in Contemporary Documentary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 118.
9. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Feminist Theory Reader*, ed. Carole R McAnn and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2003), 270.

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