Women’s Time and the cinema of Marleen Gorris

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Introduction

In this article I examine the cinema of Dutch feminist filmmaker Marleen Gorris in the light of Julia Kristeva’s concept of ‘Women’s Time’ and of more recent attempts to conceptualise a temporality that is lived ‘in the feminine’ but is not, as Kristeva’s is, either outside historical time – as cyclic and/or monumental – or aligned to the repetitive drudgery of domestic labour. Drawing on Lisa Baraitser’s concept of ‘unbecoming time’, a time that ‘will not unfold’ (2017: 5) but is lived as endurance, as ‘staying beside others’, and as care, I argue that Gorris’s films seek to depict such a temporality. Examining three of her films stretching across a twenty seven-year period, I explore the cinematic strategies through which this is achieved.

‘Women’s Time’

The title of this article purposely evokes Julia Kristeva’s now classic essay on the relation between feminist struggle and the concept of time. In ‘Women’s Time’, Kristeva famously distinguishes between ‘the time of linear history’ – time as ‘project, teleology, departure, progression and arrival’ (Moi 1986: 187), a time which is fundamentally masculine – and a temporality characterised by ‘repetition and eternity’. Unlike linear time, ‘which passes’, this ‘women’s time’ is cyclical and static - ‘monumental’ - and linked to female, and specifically maternal, subjectivity (Kristeva 1986a: 189-92). Feminist struggle in Europe, she argues, has passed through three phases, described at times as generational, at times as historically co-existing. In the first, women sought entry into linear, historical time and ‘the socio-political life of nations’ (1986a: 193). In the ‘socialist countries of Eastern Europe’,
suggests Kristeva, these egalitarian demands have been largely met. In the second phase, beginning in the West after May 1968, women rejected history, politics and the symbolic order in favour of an identity rooted in sexual difference and seen as ‘plural, fluid, ... non-identical’ (1986a: 194), and have fantasized a ‘counter-society ... imagined as harmonious’ (1986a: 202, original italics). So far, Kristeva’s phases have recognisable parallels in other histories of feminism (Hemmings 2011)¹. Kristeva’s third phase, however, the position which is her own, has proved far more problematic for feminist theory. It is ambiguously described as both existent and still to come, and envisages the dissolution of all identities in a play of individual differences. This will come with acceptance and understanding of the internal splitting that results from the entry of each subject, whether male or female, into the socio-symbolic order. The socio-symbolic order itself, however, does not change in Kristeva’s third phase of feminism. The ‘common destiny of the two sexes’ (1986a: 198), it retains its phallocentric structure, whilst women’s internal divisions arise specifically from their experience of maternity, which positions them at ‘the threshold between nature and culture’ (Kristeva 1986b: 297). For Kristeva, women and ‘women’s time’, it would seem, (will) remain outside linear time and history.

The questions Kristeva’s essay raises about gender and time have been both productive and problematic for feminist theory, as later theorists have sought to work through the implications of the binary distinction she draws, and its persistent identification of women with place, repetition, and hysteria. They were also taken up within feminist film studies to similar effect. Writers on melodrama and the ‘woman’s film’ found in Kristeva’s essay an explanation of the cyclical structure of these narratives, with their repetitions, hysterical female protagonists and lack of narrative progression (Doane 1987; Modleski 1987)². At the
same time, however, Kristeva’s essentialising of these structures proved ‘suffocating’ (Doane 1987: 193) for any attempt to theorise both female desire and a cinematic narrative that does not place that desire outside history and the real. I shall return shortly to the question of cinematic narrative. First, I want to consider more recent feminist responses to the questions Kristeva poses about the relationship of women to linear, historical time.

In Doing Time (2000), Rita Felski’s meditation on the cultural politics of time, Felski echoes Kristeva’s argument but does not endorse its universalism. ‘Conventionally, the distinction between “time’s arrow” and “time’s cycle” is also a distinction between masculine and feminine’, she writes. ‘Indeed, all models of historical transformation – whether linear or cataclysmic, evolutionary or revolutionary – have been conventionally coded as masculine’ (2000: 82, my italics). Women, she writes, have been identified instead with the repetitive, cyclical, domesticated time of the everyday, which is oblivious, and antithetical, to the time of historical change. But history, argues Felski, is only one mode of understanding time, and one which is ‘linked to fantasies of omniscience, neutrality and sameness’ (2000: 10). Time exists at multiple levels for all of us, and the everyday experience of repetition, in providing access to memory, community, and tradition, may be as much a source of transcendence as is the dynamic, forward-moving time of history. Repetition, she writes, ‘is one of the ways we organize the world, make sense of our environment, and stave off the threat of chaos’; ‘we become who we are through acts of repetition’. Repetition ‘can signal resistance as well as enslavement’ (2000: 84).

This idea of multiple, co-existing temporalities is developed more recently by Victoria Browne, who like Kristeva is concerned to link models of historical time to histories of
feminist struggle. Historical time, she argues, is ‘lived time’ (2014: 2, original italics) and polytemporal: complex, multiple and interwoven. She identifies four such interwoven strands: the ‘time of the trace’, in which the past event ‘spills over into the present in the form of a trace’ (2014: 72); narrative time – the stories we tell about the past and that in turn ‘tell us’, or construct our identities; the calendar time of ‘chronologies and timelines’ (2014: 99); and generational time: a relational, genealogical time. Feminism, she argues, needs such alternative concepts of historical time in order both to disrupt established linear temporal logics and to understand its own history. For feminism too is ‘polytemporal’; its temporalities and struggles are heterogeneous and multilinear, but they are never, as is the case with ‘women’s time’, positioned outside history.

It is Lisa Baraitser’s (2017) re-working of the idea of historical time, however, that I want most fully to draw on here. Expanding Felski’s idea of repetition as a temporality which is anti-heroic and mundane but at the same time functions to safeguard, to preserve, and to connect, Baraitser’s focus is on ‘felt experiences of time not passing’, a ‘time that will not unfold’, but is nevertheless lived: on ‘modes of waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving and remaining’ (2017: 2-5, original italics). It is a concern, she argues, that makes ‘a bridge back to a history of feminist thought and practice that has always been concerned with lives “on hold”, and with making a less bad experience for ourselves and others’ (2017: 52). She wants, she writes, to be able to ‘theorize “suspended time” in the feminine’, without aligning it either with Kristeva’s concept of ‘the cyclicality of “women’s time” or with the drudgery of domestic labour’ (2017: 79, original italics). Her formulation has affinities with Lauren Berlant’s concept of
time as ‘impasse’ (2011: 4), but Baraitser is more concerned to link it with both a practice of care and a specifically feminist ‘thought and practice’.

Baraitser’s formulation can also be seen as positioned against two contrasting recent visions of feminism’s relation to time, the first explicitly, the second by implication. The first, found within feminist philosophy, is a theorisation of time\(^3\) that draws on Spinoza, Bergson and Deleuze to conceptualise time as ‘active, positive’, an unpredictable, ‘irresistible force’ of becoming, (Grosz 2004: 244), so that feminism itself should be ‘a process of endless becoming’, ‘without definitive goal, … a feminism invested in processes, becomings, materialities’ (Grosz 2005: 167, 183). Against this, Baraitser emphasises ‘unbecoming’ time, a lived experience of time not as becoming, unfolding, actualisation, but as stagnant or suspended. The second, more visible within popular culture and not explicitly addressed by Baraitser, is found in ‘popular feminist’ (Banet-Weiser 2018) or ‘postfeminist’ (Gill 2007, 2016, 2017) narratives of an individualised female subject triumphally ‘empowered’ through her thorough immersion in the relentless historical march of contemporary neoliberal capitalism\(^4\). Against this vision, Baraitser emphasises experiences of time that are ‘slow, sluggish, or even interminable’, but which maintain ‘ongoing relations with others and the world which I shall come to name as care’ (2017: 4).

**Time and Narrative**

To suspend time, however, is also to suspend narrative, or at least the possibility of narrative progression, as theorists of the ‘woman’s film’ found. ‘[O]nce there’s no longer any element of sequence’, writes Denise Riley, ‘because that usual intuition of flowing time has been halted, narration itself can’t proceed. … Your very condition militates against
narrative’ (2020: 108). Riley’s ‘Time Lived, Without its Flow’, describes her own experience of suspended time after the sudden death of her adult son, and is referenced in Baraitser’s book. It echoes, however, more theoretical accounts of the interrelationship of historical time and narrative. For Victoria Browne, as we saw, ‘narrative time’ is a key aspect of historical, or lived time. Browne is drawing on Paul Ricoeur, for whom narrative ‘provides a privileged access to the way we articulate our experience of time’ (1991a: 99), establishing both historicality and, at an individual level, subjectivity or ‘narrative identity’. It is our ‘narrative identity which constitutes us’, constantly re-interpreted ‘in the light of stories handed down to us by our culture’ (1991b: 436-7, original italics). Gérard Genette, who provides the most widely influential account of how narrative time operates, identifies two discursive modes in storytelling: ‘narration and description’. Time is the sphere of narration: concerned with ‘actions or events’, narration is ‘temporal, dramatic’, and primary. Description, by contrast, is ancillary - ‘ever-submissive’ - and ‘seems to suspend the course of time’. It is narrative that determines genre; there can be no ‘descriptive genres’ (1982: 136, 134). Similarly, for Mikhail Bakhtin it is in the novel, with its emphasis on narrative, rather than in poetry, that ‘time and the world … become historical: they unfold … as an uninterrupted movement into a real future’ (1981: 30). For Mike Featherstone, writing from a sociological perspective, the distinction is between ‘the heroic life’, ‘lived from within like a narrative which has a beginning, middle and end’ and ‘the everyday world… the sphere of women, reproduction and care’ which is the sphere the hero leaves behind (1992: 165).

Gillian Swanson, commenting on Bakhtin’s account of the development of the novelistic form, connects his view of the novel with the emergence of a specifically modern concept of subjectivity, one which sees it as public, individual, masculine, and as unfolding in and
through the novel’s narrative form. She contrasts it with a very different kind of subjectivity, one whose ‘meanings are founded upon corporeal materiality, the relation of the encounter, the dimensions of intimate being’, and whose temporality is that of daydream and memory, ‘collaps[ing] time, [and rendering] it immobile’ (2000: 123). Where, she asks, might we find the traces of a subjectivity constituted in this way, and its ‘writing’ as a ‘cultural history of feminine subjectivity’ (2000: 122). Her question takes us back to Baraitser’s account of ‘temporal tropes that are linked together by an apparent lack of dynamism or movement’ (2017: 13), and her case studies of cultural texts linked by a common articulation of ‘time that fails to unfold’. It also takes us back to modes of feminist filmmaking and the ways in which they seek to render a subjectivity manifest in just such temporal suspensions and absence of narrative ‘flow’.

**The Cinema of Marleen Gorris**

‘A life of no time can’t be recounted’, writes Denise Riley. ‘Your very condition militates against narrative’. But she adds, ‘Maybe only the cinema could show it’ (2020: 108). The comment is elusive. It seems at first to recall the kind of distinction that Seymour Chatman (1981) draws between the novel, which can render temporal complexity and interiority, and film, which can only show. Elaborating on her comment in an interview with Baraitser, however, Riley makes clear that her reference point is in fact very different. It is the cinema of Lucretia Martel, with its ability to register a ‘visual acuity’ which is at the same time an ‘experience of a-temporality’ (Riley and Baraitser 2016: 12). Martel is one of a growing number of women filmmakers whose work can be considered in this way. Here, however, I want to explore the questions raised in the work of Riley, Baraitser and Swanson in relation to a filmmaker whose work is not usually thought of in this light, but whose films, I argue,
persistently seek to register, in Swanson’s words, a female subjectivity ‘founded upon corporeal materiality, the relation of the encounter, the dimensions of intimate being’, through a temporality often linked to daydream and memory, one which ‘collapses time, [and] renders it immobile’ (2000: 123).

Marleen Gorris is a filmmaker known chiefly for two films: *A Question of Silence* (1982), her fiercely, triumphally feminist first film, in which three ‘very ordinary’ women⁶ come together by chance in a women’s clothing boutique and ritually murder its male owner; and *Antonia’s Line* (1995), her fourth film and winner of the 1996 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, which traces four generations of Antonia’s female ‘line’ in the matriarchal community she establishes in postwar rural Holland. Here I want to discuss three of her films: her second, *Broken Mirrors* (1984); *Antonia’s Line*; and her most recent and perhaps last film⁷, *Within the Whirlwind* (2009). I shall give most attention to *Within the Whirlwind*. In many ways Gorris’s most ambitious film, it is also her least discussed, and the film that focuses most directly on historical time.

*Broken Mirrors* (1984)

*Broken Mirrors* juxtaposes, parallels, and ultimately connects two narratives: that of the routine lives of sex workers in an Amsterdam brothel, ruptured by a sudden act of male violence; and a ‘thriller’ narrative of a housewife who is abducted and gradually starved to death by a serial killer. Released after the success of *A Question of Silence* (1982) at international festivals, including the New Directors/New Films Festival in New York, and following that film’s successful distribution in Britain by Cinema of Women, *Broken Mirrors* failed to find a distributor in the US (Rich 1998: 316). In Britain, Cinema of Women found
themselves outbid for its rights by Thorn-EMI and ‘gained the dubious pleasure of watching [the film] disappear from London cinemas with indecent haste’ (Root 1986: 222). To date, it is not available on DVD. Discussing the film, Anneke Smelik has emphasised its use of camera movement, of spectatorial positioning, and of space. Like Gorris’s other early films, she writes, it is ‘situated in a separate world set apart from normal society’ (1998: 93) and addresses a specifically female spectator (1998: 108). Here, I want to address the film’s use of time.

*Broken Mirrors* asks us to focus, not on the narrative action of the ‘temporal, dramatic’ (Genette) serial killer story or the disruptive act of violence in the brothel, but on the cramped, imprisoning, abject spaces in which both the sex workers and the chained housewife must seek to establish agency and subjectivity. But it also shifts our sense of time in these spaces. Writing of the film’s two narratives, Smelik argues that they ‘really tell the same story’ (1998: 106). That story is that which Teresa de Lauretis has deemed the archetypal cinematic narrative. ‘Story demands sadism’, she writes, quoting Laura Mulvey but reversing her emphasis⁸; it ‘depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end’ (1984: 132-33). In it, the woman’s function is to wait, accepting or perhaps resisting her confinement within stasis (1984: 139). In Genette’s terms, she is an ‘ever submissive’ function of description, not narration; in Mulvey’s, she ‘freeze[s] the flow of action’ (2009: 19). In Featherstone’s, hers is the world of the everyday, not the heroic, and must be narratively left behind. In Gorris’s film, however, the doubled narrative with its linear time is not our focus. The serial killer could be any man: we watch him from a distance, curiously, as the camera circles round him; he is never centre screen and there is
no ending to his story. The act of violence that disrupts the temporal rhythm of the brothel is random, anonymous, and occurs offscreen. It, too, fails to result in victory or defeat.

Indeed, stripped of the individualisation and spectatorial involvement that would give it meaning as either heroic or villainous, this story of male sadism is revealed to be itself both repetitive and mundane. At the film’s close, although the film’s two central figures, Diane (Lineke Rijxman) and Dora (Henriette Tol), leave the brothel, intending not to return, neither of its narrative strands has been resolved. The film ends as it began, with the mundane daily routine of cleaning that begins each day in the brothel.

The film’s focus, then, is not on narrative ‘actions or events’. It is on, to quote Baraitser, ‘modes of waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving and remaining’ (2017: 2). The temporality of maintenance and preparation it depicts in the brothel undermines the (imaginary) male narrative of the ‘Happy House’ visit, but is the heart of the film. Time stutters and slows as the women steel themselves for the performance of sexual availability that they will soon have to deliver, or as they sit, spent, in its aftermath. Its rhythms are endlessly repeated – the preparations, the words and actions for clients, the exchange of cash, the cleaning both before and after, Linda’s (Anke van ‘t Hof) suicide attempts, Helene’s excuses, Francine’s (Marijke Veugelers) threats9. Even Diane’s final confrontation with the man that we now realise is the serial killer (Eddie Brugman) is a repetition of an earlier confrontation with another aggressive client. It, too, is slow, dreamlike, choreographed.

This is repetition as endurance: underlying all is the constant, everyday threat of violence. But this slowed, repetitive, often dreamlike time, the time before and after the actions
initiated by the men, is also, as Baraitser suggests, a time of care, as the women, unalike and emotionally isolated as they are, support one another through physical and emotional pain. With its shared glances, jokes, and touch, it is also a time into which we as spectators are drawn. In the first of these scenes, for example, we experience the moments before the brothel opens for the day. The camera circles slowly within the room as if one of the women, pausing on withdrawn, reflective faces, individual gestures of comfort or humour, silent routines of preparation. Then the doorbell rings, lighting and music change, and the women assume their poses as static, stereotyped objects of male pleasure.

That this narratively interstitial time, a time which ‘does not flow’ but is corporeally endured, can also be a time when subjectivity is fully realised is seen most clearly in the parallel narrative of the nameless, imprisoned housewife (Edda Barends). Here, in Baraitser’s words, ‘interiority is … lived as endurance’ (2017: 65). In its final sequence, six and a half minutes long with the central section a single, extended shot, she barely moves. Indeed the sequence begins with her reduced to the polaroid images with which the killer has recorded his victims. From the montage on the cell’s wall we can see that only the final image in the repeated sequence, that taken after each woman’s death and display, remains to be taken. Hers is a world in which time has stopped. ‘What day is it today?’ she asks; ‘I’ve been here so long.’ Deprived of historical time, she is reduced to the abject body: ‘I stink…. I’m lying in my own filth’. Yet what the scene registers is not the climax of a thriller narrative but a slow reclaiming of dignity and the coming to consciousness of a subjectivity that transcends its surroundings and speaks directly to us. The killer remains non-individualised, increasingly simply an irritating blockage to our view of her face, as, now fully aware, she answers her own question: ‘Why? What do you want?’ ‘You hate me, don’t you’ she
concludes, ‘so intensely, so terribly’, but then corrects herself: ‘Us’. In the conclusion of the
scene, as she closes her eyes and refuses to respond to his increasingly desperate
provocations, silence and passivity are reframed as rejection of the primacy of Genette’s
linear, narrative temporality.

Antonia’s Line

Gorris’s fourth film opens with the impending death in old age of Antonia (Willeke van
Ammelrooy), before then taking us back fifty years to the end of World War II and her
return, with daughter Danielle (Els Dottermans), to the village where she grew up and
where her mother is about to die. As she settles on the farm that she inherits, the film
traces her ‘line’ across three further generations: her daughter Danielle, grand-daughter
Thérèse, and great grand-daughter Sarah. Around this generational line is accumulated a
much larger community of lovers and their families, friends, and refugees from the world
beyond. The film closes with the return to Antonia’s death in the present, and the revelation
that the voice-over narration which we have heard throughout the film is that of Sarah.

It is a film in which concepts of time are central. Historical time and its changes are present.
We know that Antonia and Danielle arrive in the village at the end of World War II: that the
village has been occupied and recently liberated is evident from the British flag and the
unevenly painted sign - ‘Welkom to our Liberaters’ - which we see on the wall of
the village bar as the two walk past. Later, Antonia tells her daughter of the villagers’
wartime record of both resistance and collaboration. Thereafter, however, although
historical change is registered, its markers remain at the periphery of the film’s narrative
space, except where it erupts as violence (Pitte’s rape of Deedee and Thérèse, Crooked
Finger’s suicide) into Antonia’s world. Here, time is marked by seasons and generations, the rhythms of the body (Danielle’s desire for a child; Antonia’s renewed sexual desire ‘after all these chaste years’), and of community; it may be fecund (‘Time gave birth again and again’) or brutal (time ‘tore through life like a vulture in search of prey’). But if it flows, beyond the control of humanity, it is also interrupted, doubled, and stilled. It is interrupted by fantasy, most prominently that of painter Danielle, whose imagination re-writes the Christian story of resurrection to picture her grandmother sitting up in her coffin, singing ‘My Blue Heaven’ to the accompaniment of priest and choirboys, and blessed by a smiling plaster Christ. Elsewhere we share her vision of an avenging stone angel and a lesbian reworking of Botticelli’s ‘Birth of Venus’. It is doubled in the film’s frequent repeated scenes whose choreographed rhythms punctuate the flow of linear time, most notably those at the farm’s welcoming courtyard table, with its shifting population of family and friends. And it is stilled in the many evocations of Dutch landscape painting whose temporal stasis and complex citational structure, as Geetha Ramanathan argues, both arrest and interrogate the film’s temporal flow (2006: 181).

The film’s final courtyard scene combines all of these challenges to a linear, narrative temporality. Throughout the film our narrative focus has been split. It opens with Antonia’s final day and a third person narration: ‘Even before the sun had risen, Antonia knew her days were numbered. She knew more than that, she knew this would be her last day.’ Thus distanced from Antonia, we watch as in a single take the camera tracks her from her bed as she puts on her dressing gown, sits before her mirror and then leaves the room. Yet the dissolve into the past which follows is presented through Antonia’s reflective gaze, as her memory. This focal split, together with the film’s visualisation of Danielle’s fantasies and the
many moments when its painterly images arrest narrative flow, give it a sense of multiple, polyvocal authorship and what Browne calls ‘polytemporality’: an internally complex, “composite” time, generated through the interweaving of different temporal layers and strands’ (2014: 2). The end of the film returns us to Antonia’s death, but before this we see her final, valedictory supper. The perspective is that of the child Sarah (Thyrza Ravesteijn), Antonia’s great-granddaughter, as she gazes down from the hayloft where she sits with her notebook. The scene that follows blurs the film’s temporalities, as both living and dead villagers attend the feast and Antonia is now an old, now a younger woman. Sarah herself is revealed to be the film’s narrator: ‘And I, Sarah, her great grand-daughter, would not leave the deathbed of my beloved great grandmother...’. Yet, though the visual focalisation is through the child Sarah, the voice we hear is that of an adult woman (Lineke Rijxman), once again disturbing any notion of a unified subject-identity of the kind that, as Swanson (2000) suggests, we might expect to find authorizing, and historicizing, the story of a life.

It is tempting to identify this construction of an alternative, matriarchal temporality with Kristeva’s ‘Women’s Time’. *Antonia’s Line* is, as Gorris commented, ‘a fable, or a bit of a myth, or a fairy tale’ (Sklar and Gorris 1996: 27), and Kristeva identified her concept of a cyclical and/or monumental ‘women’s time’ with myths of a maternal utopia: ‘the belief in the omnipotence of an archaic, full, total englobing mother’ (1986a: 205). Unlike *Broken Mirrors*, the film presents us with its alternative modes of experiencing time not in the interstices of but at one remove from the passage of linear, historical time. Though the gendered division of spaces with which it presents us is a construction of the patriarchal world beyond Antonia’s farm, within its borders time, and relationships, operate differently. Yet, as Ramanathan notes, the film’s ‘concept of women and time’ has a complexity beyond
Kristeva’s ‘dichotomous formulation’ (2006: 180). If, unlike Broken Mirrors, it presents us with a time that can flow, that flow is not the forward, teleological movement of history, and it remains a temporality, to borrow Baraitser’s terms again, manifest in modes of ‘waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving and remaining’.

Mid way through the film, time is itself debated, in a discussion between the intellectually precocious child Thérèse and the nihilistic, reclusive philosopher Crooked Finger, whose response to the horrors of the twentieth century has been to embrace the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer. ‘But what about time?’ asks Thérèse (Carolien Spoor); ‘Did we invent time?’ ‘We made it up’, responds Crooked Finger (Mil Seghers). In the dialogue that follows, the two play with the idea that different life forms might inhabit their own temporalities: ‘Perhaps ants live in their time… And crickets… And trees… And stars’. The linear time of history, it is suggested, is a construction; there are other modes of experiencing and conceptualising time. The exchange ends, however, with the child in the arms of the philosopher. ‘Finger, you stink!’ she exclaims, and he replies, ‘That, my dear, is the smell of time past.’ In these final words of the exchange we are returned to the embodied present with its relationships of dependency and care, to the fact that our present bears embodied traces of the past, and to the understanding that abstract concepts are always entangled with lived experience. It is not, then, a separate ‘women’s time’, monumental and cyclic, that distinguishes Antonia’s matriarchal ‘line’ but, as Baraitser suggests in her theorisations of time as care, a different way of living with and within time.

Within the Whirlwind
Within the Whirlwind is based on a two-volume memoir by Eugenia Ginzburg, a Communist Party member and university professor who was arrested, tried and sentenced during Stalin’s purges of the 1930s and then spent eighteen years in prisons and Siberian labour camps. The film details her life in such a camp, her relationship with doctor Anton Walter, a fellow prisoner, and her eventual release. Within the Whirlwind, then, returns us to historical time. We are informed at the film’s opening that the date is 1934, and the place Kazan in the Soviet Union. The childlike song that opens the film tells us that Stalin is in power. More than this, it is based upon a memoir, traditionally a genre in which, Annette Kuhn (2000:180) reminds us, the narrator, ‘the writing I’, produces themselves as a unified subject whose identity unfolds in historical time. It closes with screen information about Ginzburg’s life after the period depicted in the film.

The Eugenia Ginzburg (Emily Watson) whom we see at the start at the film is indeed a woman who, in the manner described by Kristeva, has sought and won ‘a place in linear time as the time of project and history’ (1986a: 193). She is a professor at Kazan University and writer for the Red Tartary newspaper, a party member, and wife of the local mayor. She is also a figure of modernity: smart, fashionable, at ease in both home and workplace. When Stalin’s purges begin after the assassination of Sergei Kirov, and she faces accusations of lack of political vigilance in not denouncing her colleague Yelvov, her response is based on an appeal to reason and a rational state order: ‘Nobody has spoken out against Yelvov … he was elected to the City Committee’. It also evinces a clear sense of status and self: ‘They can’t possibly think that your wife … They know that I work for the party’; ‘I’m not guilty of anything. You want me to stand up there and tell lies?’. Modernity, writes Rita Felski, ‘celebrates mobility, movement …’, so that ‘[f]reedom and agency are … symbolized by
movement through public space’ (2000: 86). The Genia Ginzburg of the early part of the film is constantly in motion: striding confidently through streets and corridors and into lecture theatres, acknowledging in passing the admiration of colleagues. When she paces in the lecture theatre, declaiming to her students a passage from Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (1842), this movement becomes explicitly identified with a utopian vision of a progressive Russian nationalism: ‘Up, up, up the horses dash ... I love it, of course I do. I’m Russian. Give the horses their heads and to hell with the world!’ Genia, to invoke Kristeva again (1986a: 193), is fully identified with ‘the socio-political life’ and values of Soviet Russia.

With her arrest and imprisonment this sense of temporal order is thrown into disarray. Although historical events continue in the world beyond, she has no access to them. Time is either stopped – within her cell, where over a series of scenes nothing changes and she is forbidden even to pace, and in her repeated, almost identical interrogations by Party official Beylin (Ian Hart) – or absurdly accelerated, as in her trial which takes just seven minutes from formal opening to sentencing. Once sentenced, however, her removal to the labour camp inaugurates a shift from this temporal fracturing to an exploration of a different mode of temporality. As in *Broken Mirrors*, this female space not of women’s own making, and at the service and under the control of men, is what Anne McClintock (1995: 72) terms an abject zone. These zones – McClintock lists brothels and prisons among her examples - are the repudiated yet constitutive spaces on which modernity and progress have depended: essential, disavowed, and ‘policed with vigour’. As in the earlier film, this is a space marked by the experience of loss, in which women are stripped of their markers of identity: here, Genia’s public identities as university teacher, as Party member, as wife of an important official, and her private identity as mother. It is also, however, a space in which time’s
suspension – modes of enduring, waiting, persisting – can produce both resistance and practices of care, and, as in Antonia’s Line, moments of joy.

As in Antonia’s Line, the passing of time here is rendered as seasonal and diurnal change in landscapes shot in deep focus under vast skies. Dissolves map the slow change from a landscape deep in snow to one in which there are tentative signs of green, before snow covers all once again. Against this landscape, a slow procession of huddled human forms registers the women’s circular journeys into the forest where they must work in temperatures of minus fifty degrees, and then back to the camp with its watch towers, huts, and barbed wire. As in the earlier film, too, this is a temporality marked by scenes of repetition - of the women felling trees, or waiting in line for food – although here such routines carry always the threat of violation or death. We see Lena (Agata Buzek) succumb to the promise of bread for sex, and a nameless young woman shot to death as she turns away from the food line to run towards the wire fence. It is also marked by small, and sometimes larger, gestures of care. ‘Maintenance’, writes Baraitser, ‘is the temporal dimension of care’ (2017: 53); here, the sharing of food or clothing, the bodily gestures of comfort or support, sustain Genia and the other women within this suspended time. Larger gestures preserve life and enact resistance in a more direct way – Genia steps in front of a guard’s rifle to protect Lena; Lena and Greta (Lena Stolze) similarly protect and support Genia after she learns of the death of her son – although sometimes, as with the nameless young woman in the food line and ultimately with Lena, care is not enough. In Antonia’s Line Gorris both cited and appropriated images from Dutch landscape painting in her evocation of complex temporalities; here the visual references are to paintings of peasant interiors, recalled in the film’s lighting and palette in its sometimes dreamlike interior
communal scenes. As the women share time, gathering to wash clothes or around a narrated story, despite their differences and the bodily evidence of malnutrition and brutality there is also warmth, touch and laughter in this ‘communit[y] of the unalike’ (Baraitser 2017: 11).

All of these elements of the film function to produce a sense of time slowed, and lived as endurance, maintenance, waiting, persisting. They also broaden the focus of the film from an individual life narrated in retrospect – the memoir - to a wider and shared lived experience. Geetha Ramanathan has commented on the way that painting is used in Antonia’s Line both to arrest the linear flow of narrative time and to authorise a mode of seeing that is more than merely subjective. Here, poetry performs a similar function. In Western literary theory narrative and lyric poetry have been seen as opposed. Whilst narrative is characterised by temporal succession, writes Monique Morgan, lyric poetry is marked by its absence, by a sense of atemporality: of ‘absolute simultaneity in a suspended moment’ (2009: 135). Lyric poetry, that is, arrests time, binding reader and poet in a merged ‘I’ which speaks of present experience. For Christopher Nealon, in contrast to narrative, the dominant mode of historical thinking, lyric poetry offers ‘a tone that makes ‘both affirmation and exploitation audible at once’ (2007: 886). Eugenia Ginzburg was a professor of literature, and her memoir includes many quotations from Russian poetry, but in Gorris’s film these references serve very specific functions. They begin with Genia’s voiceover in her cell, quoting from poems by Osip Mandelstam and Marina Tsvetayeva. These are poems that speak to an insistence on embodied experience and selfhood in circumstances of abject degradation (‘Somebody gave me this body; What do I do with it now? ...I’m alive and I breathe’; ‘I breathed in the haydust of milky stars. ... There are five good senses on earth’),
as well as to Genia’s immediate situation (‘I’m still alive. That may be soon a sin. ...Perhaps
this age is iron and all must fall’). However they also function as an interruption to narrative.
The protagonist’s voiceover is not, as it usually is in cinema, the extradiegetic narration of
past experience from the vantage point of the present (the point of narrative closure), a
process which, as Kuhn argues, establishes ‘the narrator as a unitary ego’ (2000: 180).
Instead, it suspends time within the diegesis; as Jonathan Culler argues of lyric poetry, we
are presented with ‘a time of discourse rather than story’ (2001: 165). Voiced by Genia, and
run together, these fragments of poetry seem multiply authored across moments of time.
When they are repeated later in the film, as several of the fragments are, these moments
are then connected in a pattern that resists any sense of narrative progression. Elsewhere,
poems connect people as well as moments - Genia and Old Vlady (Heinz Lieven) share a
poem, as do Genia and Anton (Ulrich Tukur) - and the repetition by Genia of satirical
anecdotes voiced initially by other women in the camp produces a similar sense of shared
experience and shared voice.

‘Acts of maintenance are durational and repetitious’, writes Baraitser, ‘they may concern
time that seems frozen or unbearable in its refusal to move on, and entail practices of
bearing the state of nothing happening, or the inability to bring about tangible or obvious
forms of change’ (2017: 51). As she suggests, this is a time lived ‘in the feminine’ (2017: 79,
original emphasis), though not in the essentialised form of Kristeva’s ‘Women’s Time’. As in
the earlier films, public, historical time, with its structures of power and oppression, is
marginal to the focus of Within the Whirlwind but ever-present as a determining structure,
and sometimes brutally, unpredictably present. The mass rape by soldiers of the women in
the hut echoes the sudden eruption of violence in Broken Mirrors and the rapes in Antonia’s
Unlike in *Broken Mirrors* but as in the gentler *Antonia’s Line*, however, this is a space, and a temporality, that can admit men. In *Broken Mirrors* the only sympathetic male figure is never seen: he is old, a powerless recluse who lives in a shack on waste land. In *Antonia’s Line*, with its fantasy of a separate, matriarchal space, men can be admitted provided they relinquish power in the world outside (the priest), have never possessed such power (Loony Lips), and accept the terms set by Antonia (Farmer Bas). *Within the Whirlwind* follows Ginzburg’s memoir in depicting Genia’s relationship with the camp doctor Anton Walter. He, too, however, is marked by the admission of powerlessness and loss – he is a convict who is summarily sent to the mines when their relationship is discovered, and his wife and daughters have died in a transit camp – and his profession is care. It is Anton who points out that despite the weight of these losses, within the camp ‘Still, there is joy too’.

**Conclusion**

The one review of *Within the Whirlwind* that exists online, from the World Socialist Web Site, complains that after its opening scenes of Stalin’s ‘brutal machinery of suppression’ the film is ‘disappointing’ (Reinhardt 2011). Instead of focusing on the ‘reality’ of Soviet life under Stalin, states the reviewer (who then educates us about this reality), it shifts its focus to Gorris’s habitual concerns, the ‘timeless’ depiction of strong women. Despite its dismissal of the film, this is not entirely inaccurate. As in her earlier films, Gorris is concerned to explore the ways in which women might find spaces in the interstices of historical time – vulnerable, often abject spaces - in which other modes of living with each other and with time might be experienced. These, in Lisa Baraitser’s words, are modes of ‘waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving and remaining’: forms of time that do not flow or, in the fantasy world of *Antonia’s Line*, flow with a rhythm beyond
that of historical time. Depicting them involves patterns of repetition and echoing, and finding ways of arresting or sidelined narrative flow, often through the citation of ‘atemporal’ art forms. All of this seems irresistibly to suggest Kristeva’s concept of ‘Women’s Time’. Yet if this is a temporality which we can theorise ‘in the feminine’, as Baraitser suggests, it is also one lived ‘in conditions which are not of women’s choosing’.

The phrase is from Carol Watts (1998: 14), who seeks to re-think Kristeva’s concept in a way that will position ‘Women’s Time’ not outside history but rather within it as ‘an imagined point of resistance’ to the present, late capitalist world. The temporalities of Gorris’s female spaces are produced by and in relation to the power structures of historical time. Their systemic boundaries are evident; patriarchal power structures are visible at the margins of the films’ focus and can brutally, and casually, rupture it; narrative time is interrupted, arrested, but does not disappear.

Baraitser sets her concept of ‘unbecoming time’ against other recent reimaginings of time, including that of time as a constant, active and unpredictable process of becoming seen in the work of feminist philosophers such as Elizabeth Grosz. Seductive though Grosz’s vision of time as active, dynamic force might be for an affirmative feminism, Baraitser concludes, it is not very helpful in understanding the experience of time as it is lived: ‘I do not believe that anyone lives a philosophy of becoming’, she writes (2017: 13). Turning more broadly to the contemporary cultural moment, with its circulation of ‘popular mediated feminism[s]’ (Gill 2016: 612), we can also set it against such popular feminist, or postfeminist, appeals to women to embrace individualism, choice and empowerment in the construction of their own heroic life narratives within neoliberal capitalism. Writing of the heroic life in 1992, Featherstone noted the beginnings of this ‘new variation’ to an ‘essentially masculine’
narrative, in the emergence of figures like Madonna who have developed ‘a more self-confident and assertive’ version of femininity (1992: 174, 178). Today’s popular cinematic narratives, far from the repetitive circularity of the ‘woman’s film’, enact redemptive fantasies of individual empowerment in which female superheroes ‘safeguard[...] the world from male violence not with nurture but with better violence’, and are celebrated as ‘masterpiece[s] of subversive feminism’ (Williams 2017). In stark contrast, over a thirty year period the films of Marleen Gorris have persistently sought ways of depicting and exploring a temporality that is lived, but not as self-fashioning heroism. It is a temporality that is politicised in the way in which Watts suggests that Kristeva’s ‘Women’s Time’ might have been but is not; it is not outside but within the time of history, politics, power: a point of (sometimes fantasised) resistance. It is constitutive of subjectivity and lived ‘in the feminine’, in circumstances not of women’s making, within and against historical time and linear narrative, as endurance, resistance, care, and sometimes joy.

Notes

1 She is, however, overtly hostile to the imagined societies of the second phase, which she identifies with a destructiveness that is the result of ‘a paranoid counter-investment’ in existing power structures (1986a: 201).

2 For example, Mary Ann Doane writes that a ‘feminine relation to time’ in these films is ‘defined in terms – repetition, waiting, duration – that resist any notion of progression’ (1987: 109).


4 Her fictional counterparts can be found in the female superheroes celebrated in the work of critics like Sherrie Inness, who argues that the ‘increase in female action figures suggests that women are gaining a new access to heroic roles’ (2004: 78). More theoretically, Barbara Creed’s (2007) model of a female hero narrative,
patterned on Joseph Campbell’s (1949) male-centred ‘monomyth’, finds this ‘inspirational’ narrative already present in a wide range of popular cinema texts.

5 Chantal Akerman, Kelly Reichardt and Debra Granik are prominent examples.

6 The description comes from Janine (Cox Habbema), the psychologist who is charged with determining the sanity of the three women.

7 *Within the Whirlwind*, according to its star, Emily Watson, was ‘delivered pretty much the day the market crashed’. In consequence, it was not distributed and has barely been reviewed. See Rees 2011.

8 See Mulvey (1975) 2009: 22.

9 With its pattern of repetition now deprived of an ending, the folk tale that the women share at their celebration of Linda, the story of the princess and the frog, speaks to, and is spoken by, all of them. The frog, says Dora, ‘remained a fat, green, bloated, slimy toad’; still, continues Diane, ‘her father kept saying “Kiss the frog, my child, kiss the frog”’. ‘Kiss the frog’: the refrain is taken up and repeated by all the women.

10 As Antonia the sower strides across the field scattering seeds, we see a gendered reversal of Millet’s ‘The Sower’ of 1850 and the 1888 version by Van Gogh which it inspired. Elsewhere, the haymaking scene and the framed landscapes recall those of seventeenth century Dutch painters such as van Ruisdael (Jaehne 1996: 27-8). See Thornham 2012 for further discussion of the film’s use of Dutch landscape painting in its re-imagining of the relationship of its female subjects to space and time.

11 The fragility of this distancing is, however, constantly emphasised: two of the women are raped, one as a child.

12 The passage closes the final chapter of Part One, and concludes: ‘for you are overtaking the whole world, and shall one day force all nations, all empires to stand aside, to give you way!’

13 With few exceptions, the film uses different poems from those found in the memoir.

14 Mandelstam and Tsvetayeva were both themselves victims of Stalin’s purges, as were other poets quoted in the film.

References


