Space, place and realism: Red road and the gendering of a cinematic history


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Space, Place, and Realism
Red Road and the Gendering of a Cinematic History

ABSTRACT
John Hill has described the ways in which male-centered narratives of British “working-class films” of the 1980s and 1990s mobilize the idea of the working-class community as “a metaphor for the state of the nation.” Writing on films of the same era by women directors, Charlotte Brunsdon deems it more difficult to see these films as “representations of the nation.” There are, she writes, “real equivocations in the fit between being a woman and representing Britishness.” This article explores this issue, arguing that the history of British cinema to which Hill’s chapter contributes is not only bound up with a particular sense of British national identity, but founded on a particular conception, and use, of space and place. Taking Andrea Arnold’s Red Road (2006) as its case study, it asks what it is about this sense of space and place that excludes women as subjects, rendering their stories outside of and even disruptive of the tradition Hill describes. Finally, drawing on feminist philosophy and cultural geography, it suggests ways in which answering these questions might also help us think about the difficult questions raised by Jane Gaines, in a number of articles, around how we might think together feminist film theory and film history.

KEYWORDS
Andrea Arnold, British cinema, Red Road (2006), social realism, women’s cinema

To begin, I want to juxtapose two comments, both made in relation to British cinema of the 1990s. The first comes from John Hill’s chapter on “working-class films” of the 1980s and 1990s. Describing the way in which these male-centered narratives operate within a tradition of British cinema, he writes that they mobilize the idea of working-class community as “a metaphor for the state of the nation” to “give voice to a certain yearning for ‘national wholeness.’”¹

The second comment is from Charlotte Brunsdon’s chapter in the same volume, “Women and Film in the 1990s.” Writing about films by women directors of the period, she describes them as focused not on “angry young men” but on “desperate young women.” She adds that “it may be more difficult” to think of these films as representations “of the nation” because “there are real equivocations in the fit between being a woman and representing Britishness.”²
Implicit in these statements are a number of underpinning assumptions. The first, evident in the opening to Hill’s chapter, is that his essay is part of a bigger enterprise, namely to construct a particular history of British cinema. The second, also evident there but referenced too in Brunsdon’s comment about angry young men, is that the paradigmatic moment of this history is that of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the moment of the British new wave films. It is this moment that anchors Hill’s analysis and provides Brunsdon’s point of contrast. The third is that the “feminine stories” analyzed by Brunsdon are outside and even disruptive of this tradition. Finally, less immediately evident here but underpinning Hill’s arguments elsewhere and those of Andrew Higson in his construction of the same tradition, is that this tradition is both bound up with a sense of British national identity and founded on a particular conception of, and use of, space and place. In this article I want to ask what it is about this sense of space and place that excludes women as subjects, and to argue that the answers are important to any adequate account of British cinema history. Finally, taking Andrea Arnold’s Red Road (2006) as a case study, I suggest ways in which these reflections might help us think about the difficult questions raised by Jane Gaines in a number of recent articles around how we might think together feminist film theory and film history.

What, then, is the history that Hill and Higson are constructing? It is developed in a series of books and essays from the 1980s onward in which both writers have analyzed the relationship between British social realist cinema and a particular concept of national identity. British cinema since the 1930s, argues Higson, is serious, socially responsible, and engaged, in opposition to the irresponsible cinema of spectacle and escapism that threatened from the United States. Each successive realist movement in British cinema, he writes, has been characterized by a “commitment to the exploration of contemporary social problems, and for its working out of those problems in relation to ‘realistic’ landscapes and characters.” Higson traces this tradition back to the naturalist writing of the late nineteenth century described in the 1970s by Raymond Williams, and it is on Williams’s influential definition of realism that both he and Hill draw for their accounts. Realism, writes Williams, is a particularly slippery term, in part because, in cultural production, it is used to describe both intention—“to show things as they really are”—and method. His own definition—“a commitment to describing real events and showing things as they actually exist”—includes both elements. In his “Lecture on Realism” Williams argues that the term has come to have four defining characteristics. The first three—an emphasis on the secular, on the contemporary, and on the
“socially extended”—he dates back to the eighteenth century and the development of rationalism, scientific method, and a sense of social history.9 The fourth is more recent, and emerges with a commitment to “social extension” that comes to be identified with representations of the working classes. He defines this fourth characteristic, in an oddly clumsy phrasing, as being “consciously interpretative in relation to a particular political viewpoint.”10 Realism, that is, and in particular British social realism,11 has been characterized by its “progressive” political intent. In Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment’s more recent summary, realism is “a mode of representation that, at the formal level, aims at verisimilitude (or mimesis)” and whose intention is “truth telling.” It is thus “seen as being appropriate for, and being obliged to, represent social reality in the interests of knowledge and social justice.”12

The immediate “state of the nation” argument on which the social realist new wave films of the late 1950s and 1960s drew was that of Richard Hoggart. In The Uses of Literacy (1957) Hoggart argued powerfully that in postwar industrial Britain “we are moving towards” the creation of an Americanized “mass culture; that the remnants of what was at least in part an urban culture ‘of the people’ are being destroyed; that the new mass culture is in some important ways less healthy than the often crude culture it is replacing.”13 Thus the working-class male heroes of the new wave films, representatives of a moment of economic, social, and cultural change, struggle to escape their entrapment in a provincial industrial city characterized by just such a turn to “mass culture.” Their restless movement is ambiguously caught, like Hoggart’s own response, between a striving for a new individualism identified with social mobility (Hoggart was himself a scholarship boy for whom university provided a means of escape) and nostalgia for a lost “wholeness”: the unity of a now-disappearing urban working-class culture.

As both Higson and Hill argue, the construction of space and place is crucial in these narratives. It is, writes Hill, “place rather than action which assumes importance” in the films.14 In his influential article “Space, Place, Spectacle” (1984), Higson develops this argument more fully. He identifies place in these films with their use of location. Shot “on location, in actual British landscapes,”15 their use of place guarantees “the real,” becoming a signifier of the authenticity of their narratives. Space is used to refer to Stephen Heath’s concept of “narrative space.” For Heath, cinema is characterized by the constant play between movement and its regulation through framing, as “off-screen space becomes on-screen space and is replaced in turn by the space it holds off.” What performs this crucial act of containment is narrative: through narrative, space is
“regulated, orientated, continued, reconstituted”\textsuperscript{16} so that “frame space” becomes “narrative space.”\textsuperscript{17} “Place” is thus “used up” by the narrative as space, transformed into a “site for action.”\textsuperscript{18}

This is a process, however, that is never complete; there is always a surplus of “place” in the image. In Hollywood films this surplus takes the form of visual pleasure, of spectacle. In British “social realist” films it becomes “descriptively authentic detail,”\textsuperscript{19} a guarantor of the fiction’s authenticity. The final point in Higson’s argument about these new wave films concerns the nature of the narrative that they authenticate. It is a narrative of desired escape, which is authenticated above all by a shot that Higson, following a contemporary reviewer, calls “That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill.” This is one of three groups of shots that for Higson characterize the new wave films. The first are “shots within the city”: exterior shots of streets, canals, the workplace, the pub. The second group is of rural settings—the spaces of imagined escape. “That long shot,” the most important group for Higson’s argument, positions us, with the protagonist, “above the city,” looking down on a cityscape that, with distance, has become beautiful.\textsuperscript{20} It is a shot whose self-conscious poeticism points to the ambivalence of the films’ perspective. While their working-class protagonists are returned to an environment whose lost “wholeness” is lamented, the perspective of these shots is that of a distanced observer, one who has escaped. It is, after all, “only from a class position outside the city that the city can appear beautiful.”\textsuperscript{21}

Commenting in 1990 on Higson’s article, Terry Lovell points out that although Higson frames his argument in terms of class, its conflicts are exclusively masculine. Women in these films represent a lure and a threat for the male protagonist—the lure of sexuality and the double threat of domestication and consumerism. When they do feature a female protagonist, as in \textit{A Taste of Honey} (dir. Tony Richardson, 1961), she fits uneasily into a structure of oppositions that function to deny her the position of subject.\textsuperscript{22} Her journey becomes a cyclical one—repeating, like the women in the other new wave films, the pattern established by her mother. Thus the viewer best placed to occupy the position of distanced contemplation described by Higson, argues Lovell, is “Hoggart’s scholarship boy: the adult working-class male looking back with nostalgia at a remembered childhood landscape.”\textsuperscript{23} It is Hoggart who first used the term “landscape with figures” that Higson also deploys.\textsuperscript{24} This landscape is for Hoggart “a setting,” and it is here that women appear, in the figure of “our mam”: ageless, shapeless, and eternally holding the family together.\textsuperscript{25}

There is also a more fundamental gendering underpinning Higson’s and Hoggart’s arguments. The terms that Higson uses to describe this surplus of
space or place in Hollywood cinema—visual pleasure, spectacle, voyeuristic curiosity, fetishism—quite clearly draw on Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) but seem to extend its arguments into a gendering of space itself. Narrative, or time, “uses up” space; any “surplus” is regulated through its construction as “visual pleasure” to be subjected to the voyeuristic or fetishistic gaze. In the case of British cinema, this feminizing of space through a poeticizing “mastery of aesthetics” serves to authenticate a masculine narrative, which in turn, in its repetition through successive realist movements, becomes the history of British cinema.

There are a number of underpinning arguments here—about space, time, history, and the sublime—to which I shall return. For the moment, however, I want to return to Lovell’s response to Higson, and the story she uses as its counterpoint, Carolyn Steedman’s Landscape for a Good Woman (1986). Steedman’s book is itself a response to that of Hoggart and the very similar story of working-class escape told by Raymond Williams, its title a rejection of Hoggart’s feminized “landscape.” Steedman’s book refuses the status of history, which she identifies with the dominant cultural narratives of Hoggart and Williams, and their representative claims. Instead she calls it an autobiographical case study, a narrative that is “in tension” with this “more central” story, constituting “both its disruption and its essential counterpoint.” The flattened-out urban landscape described by Hoggart, viewed from “that hill,” is, she writes, a landscape “made by men.” She is precise in her evocation of place, texture, and touch. She writes, for example, of a dress sewn “out of a kind of plastic raincoat material, pale green and shiny with embossed flowers, fitting closely over [her mother’s] hip and curved like a fish’s tail.” But the (his)story is not linear; the stories are multiple and marginal. Place is not “used up” in its narrative but instead, in its tactile detail, constantly disturbs temporal order. The lives that Steedman recounts, those of her working-class mother and herself, cannot, in their specificity and complexity, be fitted to the stories told by Hoggart and Williams, or the analyses of Higson and Hill. Women cannot be “heroines of the conventional narratives of escape.” If women are to “step into the landscape and see ourselves,” she writes, then other, less straightforward stories must be told.

**RED ROAD (2006)**

Steedman’s book provides a context for the comment by Charlotte Brunsdon with which I opened this article, that “there are real equivocations in the fit between being a woman and representing Britishness.” What light, then, might
it shed on the kinds of films that Brunsdon was discussing, and the history that excludes them? The two films specifically referred to in her account are Stella Does Tricks (dir. Coky Giedroyc, 1996) and Under the Skin (dir. Carine Adler, 1997), both of them first feature films by women directors. Both of these ostensibly social realist films, suggests Brunsdon, can, in their intense focus on their female protagonists, “be read as an interrogation of the kinds of stories that British cinema has traditionally told.” Both render the fabric of their surface realism “rather more fragile and likely to be disrupted.” In a later article, Brunsdon elaborates a little more her designation of these films as “desperate girl” narratives, once again contrasting them with the “angry young men” of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Since the 1990s, she writes, there has been an increase in the number of such films—films by women directors in which there is a “noticeable persistence of an inconsolable femininity” in their female protagonists. She includes in her list Lynne Ramsay’s Morvern Callar (2002), Andrea Arnold’s Red Road (2006) and Fish Tank (2009), and Clio Barnard’s The Arbor (2010). Extending Brunsdon’s argument, what I want to suggest is that there is something more to consider here than a peculiarity, and that the paralysis she identifies as attending “the project of female subjects starring as agents in their own stories” has to do with the fact that these stories, like those that Steedman tells, “aren’t central to a dominant culture” and its history, and are indeed disruptive and contestatory. To do this I want to focus on one of the films on Brunsdon’s list, Andrea Arnold’s Red Road.

*Red Road* was Arnold’s first feature, and won the Jury Prize at Cannes. It tells the story of Jackie (Kate Dickie), a Glasgow CCTV operative who, we discover toward the end of the film, lost her husband and daughter in a car crash. When, on the CCTV screens at work she sees Clyde (Tony Curran), the man imprisoned for causing their deaths, she begins to track him obsessively, both on-screen and by following him into the Red Road flats, concrete high-rise slabs that are now used to house ex-prisoners. The confrontations and partial resolutions that result form the narrative of the film. The film was intended to be the first of three from the Advance Party, an enterprise produced and developed by Glasgow’s Sigma Films and the Danish production company Zentropa. All were to be set in Scotland, and each of the three first-time writer-directors was to feature the same nine actors playing the same characters.

Arnold’s film has been claimed for the British social realist tradition. Paul Dave includes it in his chapter on contemporary British social realist films, arguing that its focus on the personal is “part of a necessary re-focusing” of the social realist tradition “in the context of neoliberalism,” a re-focusing “on the
crisis of the social.”

“Ultimately,” he writes, “Red Road seeks grounds of commonality,” producing in its final sequences “an invitation to public space rather than a sense of alienation within a landscape haunted by decay, abandonment and the non being of deprivation.” Other critics and reviewers, however, have been decidedly uneasy about making this designation. In what proved to be a long-running debate in Sight and Sound triggered by the release of Fish Tank in 2009, Arnold’s films were accused of being merely “character portraits consciously steeped in unaccounted-for misery.” Offering “little insight into social relations, precisely because [they aren’t] grounded in reality,” the films were condemned as “frivolous, cheap and not very convincing at all” (emphasis in original). What is interesting about both attack and defense here is that the terms of both are precisely those of Hoggart and the new wave films. To her critics, Arnold’s films, focusing on female subjectivity, fail to address wider (national) social issues and therefore possess the cheap triviality of mass culture. For her defenders, this focus may lead us “ultimately” to these broader issues.

In more a nuanced response, Andrew Burke, while emphasizing Red Road’s realist elements, writes of the “intense feeling of the uncanny” that accompanies Jackie’s move from behind the cameras into the space we have hitherto seen only on the bank of screens before her. Jessica Lake describes this moment as a “surreal feeling of having entered a previous prohibited terrain, of becoming lost on the wrong side of the screen.” In perhaps the most complex account of the film’s characteristics, Michael Stewart attributes to it a “traductive realism” — a form that pushes “narrative realism closer to the avant-garde and bring[s] it more fully into abjection” as well as aligning it with the maternal melodrama, the “paranoid woman’s film,” and the figure of the “border crosser” in postcolonial feminist theory and in some women’s films.

What is being described in these responses is a realism that is constantly disrupted. It is a disruption that is partly one of form, in which the film’s doubled viewing structure—with the CCTV screen first within and separate from, then one with, the cinematic screen—sees the protagonist, Jackie, move between being subject and (knowing) object of that doubled vision. Partly it is a disruption caused by the film’s intense focus on a level of corporeal detail that approximates touch. Lake writes of its “corporeal, haptic, close experience of inhabiting spaces and transgressing boundaries,” an experience that persistently disturbs the distanced voyeurism that we identify with surveillance. But if Red Road disrupts realism, it also, in Brusdon’s words, addresses it, and with it a British social realist tradition that uses the city-as-place to authenticate a masculine construction of subjectivity and nation.
In Arnold’s film we can find all three groups of shots that Higson identifies with British new wave films, but none functions in the way he describes. The exterior shots of streets, the pub, a waste ground, and abandoned industrial buildings are the stuff of Jackie’s tracking cameras, but they do not provide context for a single, male protagonist. Instead they glimpse—briefly, intensely, and (through Jackie’s responses) with empathy—the affective lives of a range of the city’s inhabitants: the cleaner whose moods of elation and despair we follow in fragments; the solitary dog walker whose old dog dies; April, the girl from London who is abandoned at a deserted garage and then taken home by Clyde’s flat-mate Stevie; the schoolgirl who is stabbed by, it seems, her friends. Against these scenes, viewed on the CCTV screens, are set shots of the countryside, as Jackie, like the new wave protagonists, takes a brief journey out of the city. But this is not a rural idyll, or even a fantasy of romance. It is a scene of a joyless coupling between Jackie and her married lover. Only the dog roams freely; the couple stays inside Jackie’s lover’s van. At the close of the film, when Jackie has finally decided to scatter the ashes of her husband and daughter in the countryside around Loch Lomond, the camera shows us an intensely blue sky with birds whose flight we track across the screen. But their descent reveals not the Scottish countryside but a row of industrial buildings. This is not a fantasy of escape, but an insistence on the city as a space of (the possibility of) life. Toward the end of the film we also see two instances of “that long shot.” Jackie’s two final meetings with Clyde both have her standing on a hill looking down. In the first she watches Clyde as he emerges from prison, and in the second she stands with him looking down at the place where his car killed her husband and child (fig. 1). Although we can see in the distance the city spread out before them, the background is blurred; that is not our focus. It is on details of Clyde’s rejected touch, on Jackie’s bruised and grieving face, and, finally, on her tentative forgiveness of him.

Despite Dave’s attempt to construct it in this way, then, this is not social realism as representation of “the state of a nation.” Hannah McGill, in yet another attempt to characterize the film, describes Red Road as “an urban sexual revenge drama,” arguing that Jackie “suggests a number of archetypes: stalker, spurned lover, vigilante avenger.”48 This places the film in a rather different tradition, bringing it perhaps closest to Jane Campion’s In the Cut (2003), with which Arnold’s film shares a number of similarities. Like Frannie’s in Campion’s film, Jackie’s is an investigation of, and conducted through, her own embodied sexuality and desire. Through Jackie’s quest, and via the CCTV screens’ grainy tracking of the urban “real” through which that quest is in part
constructed, the film also, like Campion’s, mounts an investigation of the genre within which it seems to be positioned. Contesting the masculinity of social realism’s focus on the gritty, provincial city, it asks what it might mean for a woman to live in the city, and how the city might be re-visioned to accommodate this female subject.

The film’s opening establishes this complex relationship. We begin with a blur of lights against darkness, a disembodied robotic voice, and the sustained, ethereal sound that will recur throughout the film. As the camera pans right to left we see a series of blurred and luminous screens, before a sudden jolt of focus settles on one and we see its image judder, slip, and fragment. When the camera returns to the screens after the title image, however, they are clear—a bank of thirty-five CCTV screens—but our focus is no longer on them. Instead it is on Jackie’s hands, and on her eyes and face as she watches the screens (fig. 2).

As we see her hand maneuver the joystick to focus on the people she recognizes, and later stroke it in unconscious mimicry as she watches the waste ground sex scene that she has followed because she thought the young woman was in danger, her body moves with the screen images: now closer, now open and relaxed. This is vision as mimesis, as it is described by Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks. Mimesis, writes Marks, is a form of “tactile epistemology” that functions “not through abstraction from the world but [through] compassionate involvement in it.”49 If Jackie’s screens position her above and outside the
city, perfectly placed for “that long shot,” then her use of those screens is very different, seeking always to approximate the intensity of touch, with an empathy that is enacted through her body.50 When, after her sister-in-law’s wedding, she walks home through the streets she usually views on-screen, for a moment we seem to see the disordered city of masculine nightmares. But we pause, with Jackie, next to one of her screen familiars, the man with the ailing dog. As she stands next to him and, glancing sideways at his face, follows his gaze to the shop window in front, bending to see more clearly, the effect once more is of empathy, a desire for touch, and a shared pain.

Abandoning her uniform and screens, Jackie’s pursuit of Clyde leads her to cross the border between safety and potential danger, panoptic observation and corporeal engagement. In contrast to the continuing impassivity of her face, this (re)immersion in touch is registered in two ways: by the focus on tactile detail, and through the suffusion of the screen with red, the color of sensation. Three scenes in particular, those of Jackie’s visits to the Red Road flat, play on this shifting relationship between vision and touch. In the first, when Jackie gate-crashes Clyde’s party, the focus is at first on her investigative gaze as she watches through doorways, her body seemingly effaced and the camera shots clear and distanced. When Clyde sees her, however, she is no longer the observer but the sexually seen and sensed, and as the scene develops we experience first a tension between her continued unblinking gaze and the intense, hazy-red close-ups of hands, lips, and skin, and then, as she repeatedly closes her eyes, the domination
of the latter. When we return to Jackie’s point of view, the shot is of a room now unfocused and suffused with red. Suddenly breaking away, she rushes from the flat and, in the cold, clear space of the graffiti-covered lift, vomits.

In the second scene, we return home with Jackie after a visit to Clyde’s flat; with Clyde absent, Stevie’s parting words are that Clyde had called her “a bird with a nice arse.” Two shots on Jackie’s journey, both noted by Stewart, signal Jackie’s ensuing disorientation. Neither is shot from her point of view, and the shots are discontinuous, the first bathing the flats in a ghostly twilight and the second seeing them softly lit against the night sky. Both are ethereal and neither is accompanied by diegetic sound—the soundscape of the second is that of the “ghostly uncanny” that we find elsewhere in the film. For Stewart these disconnected shots are nonsynchronous “memory traces,” but it seems more useful to see them as a foreshadowing of the scene to come in which Jackie, arrived home, strips before the mirror, gazing intently before turning and touching her buttocks with her hands, trying to align vision and touch, her own sense of self and the newly sexualized body discovered through Clyde (fig. 3).

In Jackie’s third visit to Clyde’s flat she is again at once investigator, avenger, and object of touch. Here too there is an intense focus on texture, touch, and sound: on the wood that Clyde carves, on his hands caressing Jackie’s ankles, on nipples, lips, and skin as he brings her to orgasm. Here too there are three disconnected and strange shots of the city at night, all of them overlaid with the color of the room’s red lava lamp. The last of them, at the climax of the sexual

FIGURE 3. Jackie looks at herself in the mirror, Red Road.
act, is wholly suffused with red and accompanied by the haunting cry of foxes. Stewart sees these scenes as Jackie’s, and the film’s, encounter with the abject; and in Julia Kristeva’s sense of that which “disturbs identity, system, order,”⁵² that can be said to be true. It is not, however, an encounter with defilement and the “radically excluded,”⁵³ though Jackie’s response to her first visit frames it in that way. Rather it seems to be the disorientation that Marks identifies with “haptic visuality,”⁵⁴ in which vision approximates touch, and it is the materiality and texture of the image on which we focus. This view of the city is not, despite its height and distance, totalizing and panoramic. Merging inside and outside, it draws us in, to seek to touch and inhabit it.

The close of the film sees Jackie once more walking the city streets, having released Clyde and arranged to scatter the ashes of her husband and child. She walks in daylight, stopping to gaze in a shop window, or to greet the dog walker and his new dog. As he walks away, she pauses briefly to look past him and, following her eyeline, we see the cleaner whose story she had followed on-screen, and who also greets the dog walker. Jackie has moved from panoptic observer to a streetwalker⁵⁵ whose life touches the lives of those she meets. The final shot of the film returns us to the panoptic gaze of the CCTV camera, but with two differences. Jackie is now on-screen, one of the many inhabitants of the city streets, and the shot itself, though still high-angle, stretches out before us and, drenched in sunlight, is tinged with red (fig. 4). Dave describes this shot as the “redemption” of the city,⁵⁶ but it seems rather that it is simply seen differently. From

![Figure 4. The city suffused with red, Red Road.](image-url)
Jackie’s viewpoint, this has always been a city of multiple small stories of warmth and generosity, as well as of pain and loss, though earlier she could not touch them. Rather than the “invitation to public space” and an engagement with the “underclass” that Dave describes, an invitation that would place Red Road in the tradition of politically driven British social realist films, the invitation in this final shot seems to be to a difference of view, one that disrupts and critiques this tradition. Self-consciously presented as both realist and filmed—it is clearly framed as a CCTV shot—its perspective is that of Jackie. Finally, in Steedman’s words, “stepping into the landscape,” Jackie enters the city’s life as subject of her own story (fig. 5).

SPACE, TIME AND GENDER

What, then, of those underpinning arguments about space, time, history, and the sublime to which I referred? In Elizabeth Grosz’s account of the philosophical underpinnings of gendered conceptualizations of the city, she links the oppositions time/space and movement/stasis to the pairings interiority/exteriority and subject/object. In the history of philosophy (and in the stories of myth and religion), Grosz writes, “space is conceived as a mode . . . of exteriority, and time as the mode of interiority.” This may explain, she continues, why “time is conceived as masculine (proper to a subject, a being with an interior) and space is associated with femininity. . . . Woman is/ provides space for man, but occupies none herself.”57 Such an opposition not only assigns subjectivity to man but conceives

![Figure 5. Jackie enters the city's life, Red Road.](image-url)
of it in a particular way: as singular, interior, non-relational, and possessing the linearity of history. Since both subjectivity and authorship have been identified with interiority/time and thus the masculine subject, she adds, there is “little or no room” in such models “for female self-representations, and the creation of maps and models of space and time based on projections of women’s experiences.”

Grosz’s comments are also suggestive of feminist arguments about the sublime. In the theories of both Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, writes Christine Battersby, the sublime is gendered male; to woman is allocated the inferior category of the merely beautiful. What is crucial in these philosophical conceptions of the sublime, argues Battersby, is the idea of mastery. The encounter with the sublime is an encounter with an otherness powerful enough to threaten the self but which the self ultimately masters. In a now-familiar move, space (the other, the feminine) is mastered by time (reason, the masculine). It is this idea that the cultural geographer Doreen Massey so powerfully contests in her own far-reaching attempt to reconceptualize space. We need, writes Massey, to rethink “these problematical conceptualizations of space (as static, closed, immobile, as the opposite of time)” if we are to be able to adequately theorize subjectivity, representation, and authorship. The space-time relationship needs to be reimagined so that space becomes “the sphere of the possibility of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist.” Space thus rethought is not static or passive but “always under construction . . . a simultaneity of stories-so-far.” In such a reconceptualization, space ceases to be the setting for the heroic temporal narrative of the individual, of the sublime, or of history. It includes temporality but disrupts the dominance of a linear conception of history or narrative.

With these ideas in mind, I want to return to Jane Gaines’s questions about the relationship between feminist film theory and film history. Feminist film theory in the 1970s, she argues, in its haste to construct a “theory of absence,” “forgot” the history of early women filmmakers. Today’s “historical turn” in film feminism, however, brings the reverse danger: that of failing to “think critically about all appeals to history,” and of simply constructing instead “new ‘lost and found’ projects.” How, she asks, can we think together theory and history? And in terms of this article, how can the comments above on the gendering of a specific cinematic history and the conceptions of space and time that underpin it contribute to thinking about the issues she raises?

In her article on “Film History and the Two Presents of Feminist Film Theory,” Gaines points out the similarities between critiques of historical
narrative and arguments about the “classic realist text.” Events in both “appear to ‘tell themselves,’” giving “readers of historical narratives, like viewers of the classical narrative realist texts,” the “illusion of a privileged relationship to the historical real.” Thus “narrative realism, already found wanting by feminist film theory,” is equally inapplicable to the telling of a women’s film history. With the work of feminist philosophers in mind, however, we can go beyond this suggestive statement to argue that underpinning both of these discursive forms is the gendering of time and space, in which time (narrative, history) “uses up” space in its progress. Where space remains as surplus, the surplus may be used to authenticate the narrative of the heroic individual; spectacle, the feminine, is “mastered” by his gaze. Alternatively it may serve to authenticate what he represents: the state of a nation, a history. In the case of the history of British social realism recounted above, space, in the form of place or location, comes to authenticate at once the film’s own narrative and the cinematic history that is constructed through it. As Steedman suggests, it also serves (as “setting”) to validate the dominant narrative that is history.

It is not surprising, then, that the films that Brunsdon describes—films such as *Red Road*—produce not only “an interrogation of the kinds of stories that British cinema has traditionally told” but a realism that is “fragile and likely to be disrupted.” Nor is it surprising that their difference—of view, of relationship to space and place, a rejection of “that long shot” in favor of an emphasis on texture and touch, a refusal of representative status—is seen as failure, and continues to be framed in terms of the dominant tradition, or history. If we are to think of them differently, and draw connections between them, we need, as Gaines suggests, a different framing.

Alternative framings have been proposed. One that has proved productive is that suggested by Alison Butler, drawing on an essay by Meaghan Morris. Women’s cinema, suggests Butler, can be seen as a “minor cinema” in the sense that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use the term in describing the work of Franz Kafka as “minor literature.” “Minor” here is not an evaluative term, but describes “the literature of a minority or marginalized group, written, not in a minor language, but in a major one.” Seen in this way, writes Butler, women’s cinema “is not ‘at home’ in any of the host cinematic or national discourses it inhabits” because “it is always an inflected mode, incorporating, reworking and contesting the conventions of established traditions.” This framing does indeed allow us to account for films such as *Red Road* and the others that Brunsdon describes.

I am, however, wary of it for two reasons. The first is that it is suggestive of an earlier “lost and found” moment for feminism: the discovery in the 1970s of
“lost” women’s novels, and the construction of women’s histories of English literature. In a number of books of the 1970s—for example Ellen Moers’s Literary Women (1976), Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own (1977), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic (1979)—feminist critics sought to trace a history of English women’s writing that would also be a genealogy of a specifically female literary tradition. While all produced important and suggestive accounts, the “minor” history that was constructed remains, forty years later, both a marginalized history and the “other” to the dominant. The “major” histories of English literature that these accounts were designed to disrupt remain relatively untouched.

My second point of unease concerns the area that this concept leaves unexplored: the relationship between these texts, and what it is in that relationship that seems to invite us to construct a history from them. In her review of Gilbert and Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic, Mary Jacobus poses the question in the language of the 1970s. “How do mothers and daughters,” she asks, “‘inherit’ from each other under patriarchy?” Her conclusion is that there can be no simple, unbroken line of inheritance. This is not a separate, linear history. The mother, she writes, “is always lost,” the subject forever “in a foreign land.” But she also concludes that it is in the “textual interchange or dialogue” between such mothers and daughters that we can find a “liberating intertextuality.”

What is interesting to me in this response is its rejection of a linear, temporal relationship in favor of a notion of spatial co-presence. Reading Mary Wollstonecraft (the “mother”) together with Luce Irigaray (the “daughter”), Jacobus argues that such a “textual interchange or dialogue refuses the specular structure of frozen resemblance” to which male theory, or history, reduces women and their work. Instead what is produced is “a game, a play of difference, or a liberating exchange: a correspondence.” Her account is strikingly similar to that of the feminist film historian Giuliana Bruno, when she describes her own exploration of the early films of the Italian filmmaker Elvira Notari as a “game of two women,” a “joined collaboration, active and shared,” in which “two women, physically bonded by a ‘live presence’ and a loss, nurture each other and play little games of interpretation.” It is close, too, to Gaines’s choice of the term “constellation,” borrowed from Walter Benjamin, to describe the relationship of the feminist film historian to her object of study. We are, argues Gaines, “constellated” together with the historical figures whose work we seek to retrieve, the two “nows” of the work we recover and our attempt to (re)interpret it brought into “inextricable co-existence.” Jacobus traces a relationship between two primary texts, whereas Bruno and Gaines theorize that between
the historian and the film text, but in all three accounts linear temporality is disturbed, and time/history becomes part of an expanded notion of space—something akin to Massey’s “simultaneity of stories-so-far.” Such a reconceptualization, I would argue, is not only productive for a reading of the work of individual filmmakers such as Andrea Arnold, but provides a way of radically reframing the histories—the “textual interchange[s] or dialogue[s]”—that, as feminist film theorists and historians, we both construct and explore.

CONCLUSION
In this article I have tried to suggest the interdependency of dominant cultural histories, film histories, and the film texts upon which these histories are built. All of them, I have argued, are constructed upon a gendering of time and space in which space—mastered, “used up,” or “left over” as spectacle or as authenticating place—is regulated according to the needs of narrative or history. This is especially evident in constructions of British cinematic history, in which social realism has served as a means of repeatedly affirming the representative nature of a masculine narrative as a diagnosis of “the state of the nation.” A filmmaker such as Andrea Arnold simply cannot be fitted to such a narrative. Hers must be a failed realism, or, more charitably, a realism shot through with the uncanny or the surreal, a traductive realism linked to abjection.

To unpick these interdependencies requires a reframing of women’s filmmaking so that its “textual interchanges” or “correspondences” become visible. Through such a framing, we can track the resonances of Arnold’s films with those of other women filmmakers, as well as with those of writers such as Steedman. It requires, too, a revision of the notion of history with which Steedman herself works, in which her own story cannot be considered history because, with its ellipses and temporal disturbances, it is in tension with, and disruptive of, a “more central” (and more linear) masculine story. To rethink the gendering of time and space is scarcely an easy task, but in attempting it we might follow the lead of feminist philosophers such as Elizabeth Grosz, who argues that the masculine “formulation of universal models” needs to be contested, and that the “overarching context of space-time” also needs rethinking. To this we might add an attention to the corporeal and tactile detail with which filmmakers such as Arnold invest their constructions of space. Perhaps a useful starting point in such a project is to disrupt the dominance of time, as Doreen Massey has done, through an expanded and more complex notion of space. Space reconceived as the “simultaneity of stories-so-far” not only foregrounds the “constellations” of which Gaines writes; it leaves little room for heroic narratives or dominant histories.
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NOTES


2. Charlotte Brunsdon, “Not Having It All: Women and Film in the 1990s,” in British Cinema of the 90s, 169–70.

3. These histories have of course not gone uncriticized. Feminist film scholars such as Pam Cook and Sue Harper have produced powerful critiques of the use of realism as (masculine) master narrative for British cinema, although their arguments are rather different from mine. See for example Pam Cook, Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema (London: BFI, 1996) and Sue Harper, Women in British Cinema (London and New York: Continuum, 2000) as well as the collection edited by Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams, British Women’s Cinema (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). The tradition remains, however, remarkably persistent.


5. Although both writers focus on class in their accounts, Hill’s history, unlike that of Higson, also focuses on gender, in particular on ideologies of masculinity.


8. Ibid., 259.


10. Ibid., 68.

11. As Higson recognizes, debates about realism in the 1980s were further complicated by accounts of the “classic realist text” in which realism was identified with narrative method. In Colin MacCabe’s definition, the “classic realist text” was any text that obscured its conditions of production. It thus encompassed films as diverse as Klute (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1971) and The Sound of Music (dir. Robert Wisc, 1965). See Colin MacCabe, “Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses,” Screen 15, no. 2 (1974): 7–27.

17. Ibid., 36.
20. Ibid., 13.
21. Ibid., 18.
22. In Ken Loach’s *Poor Cow* (1967), this is even more pronounced. Its protagonist, Joy, is not only a hapless victim but peculiarly characterless, an embodiment of disconnected but stereotypical “feminine” character traits: passivity, unreliability, consumerism, narcissism, and maternal love.
28. Ibid., 71.
29. Ibid., 15.
30. Ibid., 24.
32. Ibid.
33. Charlotte Brunsdon, “‘It’s a Film’: Medium Specificity as Textual Gesture in *Red Road* and *The Unloved*,” *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 9, no. 3 (2012): 474.
34. Ibid., 463.
36. Constructed in the late 1960s, the Red Road towers, at thirty-one stories, were the tallest residential structures in Europe, built to accommodate 4,700 residents. The project, along with similar projects in other British cities, was designed as a solution to the city’s postwar housing crisis. At the time *Red Road* was being filmed, the towers were scheduled for demolition.
37. *Red Road* was the first film in the trilogy to be released. The second, *Donkeys*, directed by Morag McKinnon, was released in 2010. The third, to be directed by Mikkel Nørgaard, has not yet appeared.
39. Ibid., 52.
The debate, to which this was a contribution, concerned whether Arnold’s films truly qualified for the social realist designation, a conversation that was then picked up in the *New York Times*. Nick Roddick, whose article opened the debate, claimed that the films belong in a tradition that “pushes at” the boundaries of social realism, while Nick James, quoted in the *New York Times,* argues that they belong in its “semi-poetic strain.” See Nick Roddick, “Do We Know Where We’re Going?” *Sight and Sound* (October 2009): 19–20. See also *Sight and Sound* letters in November 2009 and December and January 2010, and Graham Fuller in the *New York Times,* January 14, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/17/movies/17fish.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/17/movies/17fish.html), accessed March 7, 2016.


Ibid., 565.

Lake, “*Red Road* (2006) and Emerging Narratives of ‘Sub-veillance,’” 236.


In a similar way, when Stevie opens the window in the Red Road flat, it is not the view that we focus on, but the danger of the open window and the feel of the wind.

Stewart, “Falling, Looking, Caring,” 564.


Ibid., 2.

Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 178–81.

The reference is to Michel de Certeau’s “Walking in the City,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91–110. De Certeau distinguishes between the “concept-city”—the city viewed from above, “simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity”—and the city’s “lived space” (95–96). This other city is encountered at ground level, through walking or wandering, not gazing. Despite the apparent gender neutrality of de Certeau’s streetwalker, the city walker who is free to wander, and who deploys “time” to circumvent “space,” is implicitly male.

“Tragedy, Ethics and History,” 52.

Elizabeth Grosz, “Space, Time, and Bodies,” in *Space, Time and Perversion* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 98–99. Elisabeth Mahoney also draws on Grosz’s work in her account of the gendering of the postmodern city (feminine) and postmodern theory (masculine). See Elisabeth Mahoney, “‘The People in Parentheses’: Space Under Pressure in


59. Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 8. Both philosophers emphasize the connection between poetry (the temporal art), sublimity, and masculinity on the one hand, and painting (the spatial art), beauty, and femininity on the other.

60. Ibid., 139.


62. Ibid., 9.


65. Ibid., 116.


71. Ibid., 281. “Correspondence” here is multiply defined: as harmony or agreement; as relation of similarity; as sympathetic response; as relations between persons or communities; as communication between persons; and finally as communication by letters.


73. Benjamin describes the historian who “stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as ‘the time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.” See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 255.

74. Jane M. Gaines, “On Not Narrating the History of Feminism and Film,” lecture at “Doing Women’s Film History II,” University of East Anglia, April 2014. See also Monica Dall’Asta and Jane M. Gaines, “Prologue: Past Meets Present in Feminist Film


76. Grosz, “Space, Time, and Bodies,” 100.