In attendance at last year’s Berlin Film Festival was Holly Fisher, whose 1992 feature-length experimental film, *Bullets for Breakfast*, has been warmly greeted on the festival circuit this year but has yet to find an American distributor. The film was entirely produced on an optical printer, as were most of her previous, shorter films, clearly as part of a productive relationship with her work as a film editor (on, for example, the Oscar-nominated documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*). Fisher has been working in films since 1965; her earlier works included political documentaries, which she gave up, she says, when she realized that they communicated only with those who were already convinced. Her succeeding films became increasingly open-ended and more forthrightly formalist. Since that time, she has made a film every year or two, though *Bullets for Breakfast*, her first feature, took four years to complete.

By means of the optical printer, *Bullets* provocatively juxtaposes—literally, through double and triple exposure—postcard images of women taken from the entire history of Western art with images of working women in a Maine herring smokehouse and some 8mm footage from John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* (uncannily marked with English subtitles, since there’s no sound) that Fisher found abandoned on a back shelf of a hardware store on Canal Street in New York City. Sometimes the image is single, while at other times three or four different images may be superimposed over each other, thus greatly affecting the way we interpret them. Images are often beautifully revealed through the play of the light and dark portions of an image that is superimposed over them. The film also occasionally pauses for a perfect match between two images, as when the face of gunslinger Victor Mature is neatly placed over the face of the woman in Vermeer’s *Woman with a Pitcher*. The opposition between movement and stillness is also an important visual motif that endows this film with the beauty of early Rauschenberg but with the added pleasure of dynamic motion.

Fisher also brilliantly exploits the potential split that exists in this and all films between the visual track and the sound track, and even when an interviewee is on screen and speaking, the sound is never synchronous. She also confounds the two tracks by often running previously spoken words across the screen, making them part of the graphic design and thus collapsing or reinventing the distinction between the figural and the written. The sound track of *Bullets* also becomes a field of clashing perspectives as the voice of a male pulp-Western writer, Ryerson Johnson, at first contrasts with that of feminist poet Nancy Nielson and then, as the film continues, grows remarkably close to her concerns. Near the end, the intensity is increased by having several voices on the track at the same time, thus doubling what has been happening on the visual track since the beginning, but also demonstrating how the two tracks differ in the conveying of meaning. (Heide Schlüpmann, the German film theorist, contributes a reading of selections drawn from what are presumably Johnson’s stories, and the effect of a German accent reading these quintessentially American texts is simultaneously humorous and haunting.) Constantly returning on the sound track are the mournful tones of the fog horns that we later realize must have been part of the textual fragments of the Maine smokehouse footage.
Pictures: A Conversation with Holly Fisher

At first *Bullets* seems completely plotless, but eventually the voices begin to grow individual personalities, and the varying perspectives they offer develop, through their random juxtaposition, into a kind of postmodern narrative. High art is purposely confounded with popular art, and the eternal questions about the meaning of art itself are posed in witty and innovative ways. Though there is occasional evidence of a strong authorial intention (when, for instance, a striking juxtaposition seems just too perfect to have been accidental), for the most part the creative task of reassembling the film’s fragments into some semblance of meaning, postmodern or otherwise, is left up to the viewer.

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**PETER BRUNETTE:** Could you tell me a little bit about your previous work?

**HOLLY FISHER:** Well, even my first film presented multiple points of view, which I’ve always been interested in, especially in juxtaposing them. When I began making personal, experimental work in the early 1970s, this idea took on a formal aspect. In 1977 I made a piece called *Glass Shadows*, in which I dealt with the complexities of subject and object and the plane of projection. For about six weeks I shot a series of film-sketches involving early morning light, my—nude—self with Bolex in hand, and a pane of glass. In putting that piece together—the footage was very sensual—I could see that I could make a kind of sexy film with this, or I could exploit the pretty pictures, but I chose not to, and structured it to reflect the process that I had gone through in exploring this idea. The sound track is very minimal, a dripping faucet—it’s a quiet film.

The following year I made a film called *From the Ladies*, commuting from my studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to a multiple-mirrored bathroom in the Holiday Inn in New York City. I wanted to make something cooler, but my images turned out to be very sensual without my intending them to be. I was attracted to this ladies’ room—lined with mirrors and orange-flocked wallpaper—because of its contradictions: I found it an alien kind of space, yet one that was theoretically designed for me, being a woman.

I’m in both of the films and I was playing with reflection and with me as maker of the films and as object of the films being made and playing games with that idea. In *From the Ladies* you could see me scratching my head wondering what the hell to do next. Working/not working, active/passive, subject/object, that kind of thing.

*Did these films have a feminist perspective, or did you come to that later?*

Well, sure. I’m a woman trying to figure things out so for me they’re feminist. I’m not sure what the word means today, and what you mean by it. My intention
here is to break down barriers, labels, pigeonholes that tie me down or limit my options. My point of departure is from a postfeminist point of view—as a woman in the 1990s trying to figure things out. Some of my early films were not accepted in some women’s festivals because they weren’t about menstruation or things like that. The people who were influencing me were people like Michael Snow, Steve Reich, and John Cage, but I pretty much went my own way. I’ve always wanted to exploit dismantling of Western, patriarchal representations of women.

Absolutely. A feminist critique is my point of departure. At the end of his film, John Ford depicts Clementine standing rigid as a fencepost as she watches Fonda ride off through Monument Valley heading into his next adventure. A game I played in the making of Bullets was to see if I could transform this image of Clementine-as-fencepost into a flesh-and-blood woman, explore the idea of power, how power relations are manifested in image and film structure. The project for me is how to shift the question of power to one of empowerment—for both maker and spectator. My films have taken more and more a nonlinear course—nonlinear, multilayered, and yes, open-ended. I really can’t say if this is feminist or not.

Well, in Bullets, there is the spectacle of the artist doing her thing, but there is also a strong analytical side to it, in terms of your display of the images of the female and the way she’s been represented in Western art. I guess that’s what I mean by feminism here—an or woman as subject. And I’ve always been intrigued by the art/life split and what the hell that is all about. What is creative? Is there such a thing as a creative act? In Bullets I zeroed in on artworks that depicted women and I tried to look at them as though I had never seen them before, without worrying who painted them. There was a certain random aspect as to how I got those particular images, and that randomness enters into all of my work.

Why is this randomness important to you?
I always like to go where I’ve never been and that’s the best way to get there, I think. I don’t script what I
do, because if I script it I don’t feel I need to make it. I like to keep the process very alive, to be on the edge of chaos as I work, not even knowing what postcard, in this case, I’m going to pull out next. It allows me to really respond to the composition. Each picture has its own ideology, and I was interested in seeing how I responded to that. And I find in Bullets that all the characters, male and female, are in a sense parts of myself, parts I like and parts I don’t like.

I’m interested in breaking down these gender notions. To me, my pulp writer is more “feminine” than my feminist writer, who loves to chop wood and fetch her own water and live alone without electricity.

**In what way is he more feminine?**

He’s very close to being a Zen monk, the kind of guy you’d imagine standing on his head and clapping his heels in the moonlight. He has no ambitions, he doesn’t need to write the Great American Novel, he understands perfectly what he is doing and why. His favorite thing to do is to collect rocks off the beach. He doesn’t own anything, lives in a very intuitive way, and writes whenever he feels like it. We share a distaste for ideologies coming from any direction.

*I was struck by the juxtaposition of the more popular art forms with the more “serious.” They seemed to be on an equal footing in the film.*

That’s also why there are images of Tienanmen Square in the film. I see all that material as artifact, and one of the many themes running through the film is the question of heroes and heroines and do we want them and do we replace Henry Fonda with a woman hero? May Ling, for example, was presented on American television as a hero and I brought her into the film a) because that was happening while I was making the film and I saw a chance to bring in current history, and b) to question whether this image was just one more in the rubbish heap of images. So I’m interested in this gap not just between high art and low art, but between art and real life, whatever that might be. Current history versus one’s notion of history.

**In my own theoretical work, I’m interested in the idea that the meaning of film images is always loose and unmoored, and only understandable in a given context or frame. The images you use may mean something totally different in your film than they did originally.**

That’s the essence of the project to me. And: if you put yourself in the center of that—how do I find myself in this crazy mix of tradition and image and nature?—is there such a thing as meaning or is it completely relative?

*I’m also fascinated by the struggle in your film between social commentary on one hand and the very aestheticized images you put together. They’re very beautiful, but, as you know, those two traditions are often seen as being contradictory.*

That you can’t have pleasure and ideas at the same time? My first answer is, Well, why not? Another answer is that by using juicy images it may cause you to pay attention! I’ll look for any route I can find to draw the spectator into this game of participating. If the color red draws you in, or if a familiar image triggers some memory in you that connects to the film, any of those are fine as a handle, something to pull you in.  

For me, it’s all material at this point. It has meaning by what is next to it. I could imagine expanding into using real narrative. But only as one way to tell a story, set against something else. It’s the difference that highlights that “life between” that I’m interested in exploiting.

**That life between . . . ?**

One idea and another perhaps, or beauty and meaning. There’s a space between those, just as the film works as much by what’s missing as it does by one frame next to another in the persistence-of-vision phenomenon.

**Does your film attempt to redefine narrative? Is narrative a trap?**

This film plays with various kinds of narrative—visual, poetic, linear. Ryerson Johnson, who tells linear stories . . . I also present his life in something like a vague chronology which maybe reflects how he works. Nancy is represented only in her poems and in fragments. I’m interested in expanding the idea of narrative; beginning, middle, and end makes no particular sense to me. I don’t see the world that way. I’m interested in the notion of cycle.

After making my first documentary, and in the editing I do to make a living, the project is always how to get the viewer to feel involved, to feel responsible. I know very well how to cut conventional work, where the viewer identifies and projects and blah blah, and it might be a documentary for public TV and you feel very bad while you watch it and you might write a check [for a good cause] and then you go out for dinner. And the project is how to embrace the spectator into the project so that the watching is present—so that film isn’t about something, it is something.
Do you mean “responsible” in a moral and ethical sense?
That makes me nervous, but it might be true. When I talk about trying to break down notions of gender or any sort of ideological notion that restricts one’s freedom, I guess it’s safe to say that I’m trying to present ambivalence as an idea. A tolerance for the gray space, as opposed to black and white. Being able to tolerate difference—that’s where real choice is.

If your work has a social dimension to it, how do you justify choosing a form which is so anti-representation that the audience will perforce be very small.

[Laughter.]

I mean, it’s the old Brechtian problem. If you want to have some impact, don’t you have to be representational and have narratives and things like that?
I’m getting uncomfortable with the crusade line that is coming up here, because I’m not quite ready to get on that horse. And I have to say that even though this film deals with issues of gender and whatnot, it’s still material for me. There are issues in my life and in the time that I’m working—and I use them as material. I think that the whole project for me is something closer to music. It’s something to be felt. You can analyze it if you want, but that’s not the thing that interests me the most. For me, it’s something to do with the color and the rhythm and the whole package, the composite. I love the complexity. It’s like playing three-dimensional chess in my studio. But it’s the whole shape that excites me; the moral idea is not the center of it.

Do you then see yourself using this material in the traditional sense of artistic self-expression?
That’s an aspect of it. Someone asked me if [optical] printing makes me more distant from the images. Actually I don’t give a damn any more about expressing myself—isn’t she a sensitive person!—it just doesn’t matter. I’m interested in how to make me, you, the viewer, feel alive, how to key into that. I don’t make pretty images so that people can say I’m sensitive, it’s just something I do.

So how do you place yourself in your work as a person who naturally wants to express herself, but not in that “Look at me, how great I am” fashion?
I’m obviously trying to find an alternative to that—call it male, phallocentric, what’s the word?—that I think belongs to men and women since probably some definable point in history. But I’m not comfortable even with words like “intuition” because it gets put with women and Asians, and so on. I think there is a process of thinking and being that belongs to us all that needs to be validated in all of us. I need to validate it in myself because my head doesn’t work the other way. I couldn’t make a film until I stopped worrying about coming up with a story.

There’s also a practical problem with your kind of film-making. You have to make it feature-length to get it shown and then how do you do what you’re doing in feature length?
I realized in the course of making Bullets that I needed that length to let it all play out. I don’t think it’s intimidating. If you read the transcript, it’s funny. I do have a secret hope of getting it into theaters, because I think people could enjoy it. No one knows how to watch this kind of film, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be watched. It takes work, and people aren’t conditioned to work when they go to the movies. It’s too bad that everything on celluloid is called film. There must be a way to present a film that is not precious, and not just shown in the back room of the Whitney Museum.

Peter Brunette’s latest book is on Truffaut’s Shoot the Piano Player, in the Rutgers “Films in Print” series.

[Bullets for Breakfast is available from Women Make Movies and the Department of Film of the Museum of Modern Art, both in New York City.]