

ON LISTENING, TALKING, AND SILENCE: REENACTMENT AS FEMINIST PRAXIS IN *MARIA SCHNEIDER, 1983* AND *MY NAME IS ANDREA*

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The 2022 festival season saw the release of two films marked by startling coincidence: Elisabeth Subrin's *Maria Schneider, 1983*, at Cannes; and Pratibha Parmar's *My Name Is Andrea*, at Tribeca. Both films center on real women (Maria Schneider and Andrea Dworkin) whose artistic and political lives were highjacked by sexual assault. Both Schneider and Dworkin died of chronic illness at fifty-eight years of age. And the work of each has been consistently misunderstood, ignored, or denigrated, both throughout their careers and after their passing.

Subrin and Parmar both deploy performance and reenactment in unconventional ways in their films, casting multiple actresses from diverse backgrounds to play their subjects and experimenting with temporal layering. There is a core tension, in both projects, between the particularities of embodied experience and the pervasive narratives of violence, trauma, and misogyny that repeat, ad nauseam, across time. And each film dives deep into audiovisual archives to make a case for the continued relevance of these artists to the contemporary moment.

At the same time, the formal and affective differences between the films are substantive, involving interpretive and political gestures by each filmmaker that demand a close reading. Perhaps most significantly, these works approach performance in strikingly different ways, channeling each project toward different conclusions about identity, history, and artistic praxis. While no simplistic comparison need be imposed, reading them alongside each other illuminates the divergent ways in which reenactment can be deployed. Equally striking are the interventions each film makes into

feminist history, fashioning explicit and distinct connections between the legacies of the women they depict and a fractious political present.

Maria Schneider, 1983

The original 1983 interview with actress Maria Schneider is an odd artifact. Conducted some twelve years after Schneider appeared in *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972), it appeared on the French television series *Cinéma cinémas* (produced by Anne Andreu and Raoul Sangla, 1982–91). The conversation, clocking in at just over seven minutes, promptly goes nowhere. Unlike other episodes of the series (such as a 1984 interview with Jimmy Stewart filled with detailed Hitchcock anecdotes), Schneider reveals very little. Instead of insider production stories, Schneider repeatedly dismisses the entire enterprise: “I’m someone who lives more than works. . . . I’m not dedicated to cinema. I can’t do film after film. I’m someone who puts life first.”

Between extended pauses, during which Schneider gazes into the distance, the off-screen interviewer (Andreu) attempts to direct the conversation toward *Last Tango in Paris* by asking, for instance: “As an actress, do you enjoy meeting actors who are a little like myths?” Schneider promptly shuts down this line of questioning: “I was more impressed, more moved, to meet Anna Magnani than Brando.” Andreu struggles to find anything else to talk about, and resorts to vague questions about casting. Schneider resists these as well: “I refuse a lot because I think there are few worthy roles for women, few roles for women that I read and want to do.”

Maria Schneider, 1983 opens with the actress, performed by Manal Issa, being interviewed. She is sitting in a café with her back to a large mirror, the tight curls of her shag refracted in beveled panes of glass. The film begins midconversation, with Schneider isolated in the frame, responding (in French) to an unheard question. “Because actors aren’t

Film Quarterly, Vol. 77, No. 1, pp. 13–24. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2023 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2023.77.13

taken seriously, no? It's still considered a job for the crazy, for the marginal, for . . ."

Subrin's shot-by-shot reenactment of the *Cinéma cinémas* interview is staged in meticulous detail—from the clatter of the restaurant, to Schneider's lavender eyeshadow, to the low-fidelity rendering of the red block letters of *Maria Schneider, 1983*, the film's title. Issa, as Schneider, shifts in her seat, her gaze directed now at her off-screen interviewer, now down at the table, at once defiant and visibly uncomfortable. She lights a cigarette. "It's a very, very dangerous career," she warns the viewer. "Very. I wouldn't recommend it to any . . . to any young person."

Viewed alongside the original interview, Manal Issa's performance is uncanny in its verisimilitude. Her hands are in near-continuous motion as she lights and drags on cigarette after cigarette. Each gesture and pause feels a perfect mirror to Schneider's takes. And the casting is not incidental. A French-Lebanese actress, Issa staged a red-carpet protest at Cannes in 2018 over the ongoing massacre in Gaza; in 2022, she issued a blistering critique of Sally El Hosaini's *The Swimmers* (2022), in which she had the lead role, for being "like those banal American films, filled with . . . orientalist clichés." Issa pointed in particular to one shoot in the Aegean, where actors staged a refugee crossing while real refugees were attempting to cross the water beside them: "You can't invoke trauma by creating a new trauma for the performers; you don't hurt people to just get a scene."¹

In *Maria Schneider, 1983*, as Issa's channeling of Schneider unfolds, she reveals both her performance and Schneider's own to be acts, present and past, now layered over each other. Midway through, the interviewer, breaking from her line of questioning, consults Issa/Schneider about the final edit of the interview in which they are engaged: "Would you be OK if we illustrate this portrait with an

excerpt from *Last Tango*?" Issa/Schneider shakes her head, then turns directly to the camera, her hands folded in prayer position, pleading with audience or cameraperson or both. "No!" She shifts back to the interviewer, lowering her voice. "No, I'd rather not. *The Passenger*, whatever you want. But *Tango*. . . No. I don't want to talk about *Tango*."

Maria Schneider was nineteen years old when she starred alongside Marlon Brando, forty-eight, in Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*. One scene in the film was not included in the script: in it, Brando's character, Paul, rapes Schneider's character, Jeanne, using a stick of butter as lubricant. While the sex was simulated, Bertolucci and Brando had conspired not to inform Schneider of the scene before the shoot because, as Bertolucci stated in an interview, many years later: "I wanted her reaction as a girl, not as an actress."²

The film and the scandal dogged Schneider throughout her career. She refused to perform any more nude scenes, and left several productions due to questionable labor conditions. Despite a reputation for "unreliability," and subsequent struggles with depression and substance abuse, Schneider continued to act, including lead roles in films by Jacques Rivette and Michelangelo Antonioni, most notably Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975), her favorite performance.

In the second sequence of *Maria Schneider, 1983*, the cut from Issa to Aïssa Maïga on-screen, voicing the now-familiar dialogue, registers as a jolt. Maïga's delivery is slower, her frustration not as close to the surface, each line punctuated by a small smile. The table, the mirror, the blazer and blouse remain the same. The cigarette has been replaced by a dark green espresso cup. The texture of the video itself shifts, very subtly, to a higher resolution. As the interview unfolds, other minor changes occur. The line "Like everywhere, it's



Manal Issa in *Maria Schneider, 1983*.



Aïssa Maïga in *Maria Schneider, 1983*

men who have the power in cinema” is adapted by Maïga from an earlier iteration. The Senegalese-French director and actress had delivered an unscripted, incendiary speech against racism in the French film industry at the 2020 César Awards. The sentiments of that speech are echoed in her modification of Schneider’s words: “Like everywhere, it’s white men who have the power in cinema, and when there are women, they’re nearly always white.”

Within the interview, the conversation inevitably circles back to *Tango*. Maïga/Schneider silently clenches her jaw. “It’s just a film. I mean . . . I don’t always want to—that’s what I’m always associated with. Everywhere I go, *Tango*’s always with me.” Her hand slices the air. “*Basta!* Anyway, I’d prefer to talk about *The Passenger*, which is a film that is closer to who I am. So, if it’s me you want to talk about, I’d rather we talk about that.” The interview ends without a single question about *The Passenger*. Maïga/Schneider straightens as the questioning ends, adding a coda: “All good? Did you get everything?”

Ivone Margulies has noted that in certain films, such as *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1984) and *Sons* (Zhang Yuan, 1996), “reenactment regurgitates the real in the form of repetitions that are unconscious, accidental, and compulsive.”³ Much like Walter Benjamin’s notion of the optical unconscious, the reenactment’s mimesis defamiliarizes the real, revealing something not otherwise visible. The actions of the reenactor, highlighted here as performance, create a kind of doubling of the original event. The viewer experiences “a sense of co-presence” with the representation, a “temporal referential uncertainty . . . that pervades each film and repeated gesture and echoed image.”⁴

Though Margulies’s study focuses on films in which on-screen performers reenact events from their own lives,

I would argue that Subrin makes use of a similar disquieting doubling as a recurring strategy in her films. Indeed, Margulies cites Subrin’s *Shulie* (1997) as demonstrating the critical possibilities of parafictional reenactment. In that earlier work, the labor of reenactment multiplies across registers, with the actress Kim Soss performing the exact movements and speech of a young Shulamith Firestone, while Subrin and her crew reprise every framing, every camera movement of the original filmmakers in order to re-create a painstaking and sometimes anachronistic copy of a 1967 documentary. The distance that opens between the original and the reenactment constitutes a historical intervention, as Margulies argues, “opening a foreclosed fate to new potentialities.”⁵ In *Maria Schneider, 1983*, Subrin seems similarly concerned with tracing the original piece of footage to unearth new circuits of meaning.

The quiet precision and the almost fetishistic attention to detail invite the viewer to focus with a rigor to match Subrin’s own. And as each repetition builds on the previous one, it becomes clear the performers have studied this filmic moment with equal exactitude. There are obvious differences between the actresses, race being the most immediately apparent, yet through their embodiment of this one clip, they find and amplify the smallest gestures from the original, emphasizing certain phrases in ways that signal something shared and remade. And the viewer, hyper-focused by now as well, is led toward both the commonalities and the subtle differences each actress brings to the screen.

Subrin has described her production process as highly collaborative, particularly in her work with performers. Enabled in part by the short time frame of the interview, each actress is granted an unusual luxury to explore her own relationship to Maria Schneider and her original performance. What at first appears to be a perfect repetition



Maria Schneider in *The Passenger* (1975).



Isabel Sandoval in *Maria Schneider, 1983*.

reveals itself as a subtle chain of iterations in which each actress takes up the performance of the other, teasing out points of connection and divergence. (According to Subrin, each actress listened to the performances of the other during the course of the production.) The performances feel motivated less by an assertion of universalism than by an expression of empathy, an emotional response on the part of the actresses that is echoed in the experience of the viewer.

By the time of the third cycle of the *Cinéma cinémas* reproduction, the viewer knows the interview intimately. Thus, when Isabel Sandoval as Schneider begins speaking in English, the audience is snapped out of complacency. English-speaking viewers may be further thrown by the inconsistencies between Sandoval/Schneider's dialogue and the English subtitles that have already been displayed twice.

Translation was an important component of the project for Subrin, as Schneider, a French native, often had to act in a second language, raising questions about the impact language might have on a performance. Like reenactment, the act of translation serves as another mode of doubling, or reperforming. Subrin asserts that "both an actress's approach to a line and a translator's approach to a line are beautiful, elegant, deep processes."⁶ Subrin and translator Daniella Shreir provide different phrasings for small idioms in the translated dialogue as well as the subtitles, subtly revealing their hand in the process.

This disjunction resonates most strongly in Sandoval's performance, when small acts of translation become increasingly apparent. A larger, gold-rimmed green teacup now echoes Maïga/Schneider's, the cigarettes have fully vanished, and the image appears in a higher resolution than in the previous two performances. Sandoval/Schneider pulls apart and adds to the dialogue: "There are very few worthy women roles, few trans roles that I really want to do. . . . We always make a woman exist in relation to a man, in relation to her sex."

Once again, the interviewer asks, "You're not capable of separating the force of the film and what you experienced yourself?" At last Sandoval-Schneider says aloud what remained silent in the previous versions:

It's a film in which I was raped. I wasn't told this was going to happen. The rape was not written in the script. Nowhere. I didn't know about it. But you see, I made real tears. Real screams. Humiliation. Now people always connect me to that, everywhere. *Tango* is always with me. Would you be able to distinguish what you experienced yourself from the "force" of a

film? If you must talk about *Tango*, we should talk about that.

As she speaks, Sandoval visibly struggles to contain her emotions, and her eyes harden in accusation as she confronts her interlocutor.

Subrin's casting throughout the project is significant, as are subtle shifts in the visualization between each sequence. Sandoval is a New York-based Filipina filmmaker and actress who, in 2019, was the first trans director to compete at the Venice International Film Festival. Visually, Sandoval's version of the interview continues a transformation that began in Maïga's scene: the improved resolution of the image itself seems to mark a movement in time. Whereas the Issa interview glows with the haze typical of 1980s video, each subsequent version becomes crisper and more defined, in line with historical developments in technology. The project thus brings Schneider's initial moment of resistance into the present and into dialogue with contemporary conversations about representation and sexual exploitation in the industry.

Subrin's film foregrounds for her actresses what Maria Schneider was denied: respect for their artistic craft. Subrin has a career-long interest in the fate of actresses—of Maria Schneider in particular—and on the devaluing of their work by the film industry.⁷ In *Maria Schneider, 1983*, the pacing and tight structure create space for each performer to enter into this moment of time, forging their own connections to Schneider as actresses navigating an abusive industry. In the original interview, Schneider is asked if she dreamed of being in the cinema as a child. Schneider responds that she wanted to be a painter. Sandoval/Schneider offers a different answer: "I wanted to act. And become a director." A smile breaks across her face as she rests her chin on her hand. It registers as a singular moment of joy. "*Il destino*" ("fate"), she says.

My Name Is Andrea

Pratibha Parmar's *My Name Is Andrea* is a portrait of feminist writer and activist Andrea Dworkin woven from a collage of texts, archival footage, and reenactments. Dworkin is one of the most polarizing figures in the history of Western feminism; her work, and the backlash against it, reside at the rift between second- and third-wave feminism. When I first encountered feminist and queer theory as an undergraduate in the early 1990s, the riptides from the feminist sex wars still shaped the field. Andrea Dworkin was studied primarily as a bugbear representing everything that new feminist thinkers and activists were working against.

She was dismissed as a biological essentialist, an anti-pornography killjoy who refused to acknowledge women's sexual pleasure, coauthor of the "Dworkin-MacKinnon Ordinance," which was weaponized against feminist and queer media.⁸ In my experience, Dworkin was almost never discussed in terms of her actual writing, only her activism and political effects.

It is Dworkin's writing, and her devotion to that practice, that Parmar places at the heart of *My Name Is Andrea*. By accessing a staggering archive of published texts, private letters, television appearances, and intimate home movies, Parmar gives viewers access to facets of Dworkin rarely recognized in her lifetime. The film shifts between archival materials, recordings of Dworkin's writings (as voiced by Dworkin in her lifetime and as read by others for the film), and newly shot dramatic footage reenacting scenes from across her body of work. Five actresses are cast to depict Dworkin's texts/life at various stages: Amandla Stenberg, Soko, Andrea Riseborough, Christine Lahti, and Ashley Judd; notably, each of these actresses has a history of feminist advocacy around such issues as sexism and abuse in the film industry, pay equity, racism, and queer representation. Masterfully edited, the film is an unfolding stream of textures, actions, and ideas, all undergirded by the flow of Dworkin's words in voice-over.

The structure of *My Name Is Not Andrea* is not chronological; instead, much like Dworkin's writing itself, it is interrupted by trauma and elision. "A nightmare doesn't take place in a linear modality," Dworkin remarked about the effects of sexual violence, noting that lapses in memory and repressed emotions are "part of what keeps you alive."⁹ Cycles emerge in the footage Parmar creates and assembles: brief moments of freedom, intrusions of violence, a loss of language, and language's return through Dworkin's political and creative speech.

Indeed, writing and language are central to the film's argument, with a particular focus on Dworkin's literary ambitions. Parmar has remarked that "it was important that it was not a biography that remained in the past, but that it was looking at a writer's life, what shaped that life, and what did she have to overcome in order to . . . have her voice heard."¹⁰

Dworkin's literary ambitions generate much of the momentum in the film. Played by Soko as a teenager, Andrea propels herself on a bicycle while declaring her desire to be one of the great (male) writers, then later turns giddy in a car when Allen Ginsberg tells her he loves her. Archival footage of Dworkin at the typewriter is woven throughout, along with letters to her parents, read in voice-over. And

sexual violence brings the flow of words and images to a halt, repeatedly.

One sequence chronicles Dworkin's arrest at age eighteen, in 1965, during a protest against the Vietnam War at the US Mission to the United Nations. While jailed at the Women's House of Detention, in New York, Dworkin is humiliated and abused by prison doctors, who brutalize her with a speculum. Here Dworkin, now played by the French actress and singer Soko, is drained of the life force animating the earlier sequences. Soko's performance is intercut with an earlier reenactment of this incident in a film, *The Cloister* (1970), directed by Gretchen Langheld from a screenplay written by Dworkin, who is played in the film by Joan Anne Maxham; they were all classmates at Bennington College. "Hurt past what [she] had words for," Dworkin was radicalized, and her writing took a political and feminist turn, seeking to speak "for the marginalized, the tortured."

My Name Is Andrea makes a case for Dworkin's intersectional politics, particularly the influence of Black liberation thinkers on her radicalization. In one passage, Dworkin (performed here by Riseborough) stands before a photograph of Huey Newton, transfixed by his defiant gaze. The scene shifts, via voice-over, to a letter from Dworkin to her parents about her need to return to the United States from Europe, citing her solidarity with the Black Panthers and referencing *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*.

Parmar cuts to a televised interview (circa 1971) with George Jackson's mother, Georgia Jackson, and her eviscerating response to a question about the Panthers and violence: "As many Black people that get killed every day in this country and nobody knows or cares, you're gonna tell me about violence? . . . I don't want to hear it." This scene is juxtaposed directly with montages of footage from more-contemporary protests: Black Lives Matter after the 2020 murder of George Floyd and the 2017 action "Femicide Is Genocide" by Argentina's Fuerza Artística de Choque Comunicativo. As the Argentine protestors strip and pile their naked bodies in a die-in, Parmar plays the words of Dworkin's speech "Mass Murder in Montréal" (1990) on the soundtrack: "We count the number of rapes. . . . We count the dead. And when those numbers start to change in a way that is meaningful, we will then talk to you about whether or not we can measure progress."

Parmar's intense focus on Dworkin's writing practice in relation to a broader history seems to be a corrective, pushing back against the dismissal of Dworkin in the wake of the 1980s sex wars. Sometimes, such attention can



Andrea Riseborough in *My Name Is Andrea*.

be illuminating. In an audio clip from a radio appearance, for example, when a male interviewer asks Dworkin if her comparison of pornographers to Nazis “devalues” her point, Dworkin responds:

I think if I did it in that simple way it probably would. What I do say is that . . . I believe, truly, that the Nazis changed the world in that sadism, public sadism, became much more acceptable to greater numbers of people. I think that’s a victory for the Nazis and I think the pornographers are their heirs. They’re not ideologically driven, they’re profit driven. But they are public sadists and they hate women.

This is a far more nuanced argument than Dworkin is typically given credit for. It highlights, as well, a pervasive reaction to Dworkin’s more incendiary statements. As Dana Glaser observes, “What makes her difficult to read is precisely what many think makes her easy to read: the assumption of her literalness.”¹¹ Dworkin deploys provocations that muddy the line between the crassly literal and the strategically theoretical—many times to her own detriment, as evidenced by commentary on her simplistic naivete even from reviewers sympathetic to her work.¹²

Questions of literalness become especially problematic when considering the relationship between the sexual violence Dworkin experienced firsthand, her writings about violence in her political and theoretical work, and the representations of violence in her fiction. Again, this ambiguity registers as both calculated and thorny. On the one hand,

Dworkin makes a searing case for the political nature of the personal, wielding depictions of trauma both as evidence and as rhetorical tools. Yet her strategy renders her entire body of work vulnerable to callous dismissal as reactive and wounded.

Parmar asserts the continued relevance of Dworkin’s work throughout the film by combining reenactments and archival news clips with video from present-day street vigils. Her point is indisputable: regardless of which narratives of political or social progress are told, sexual violence against women has continued, unabated, and grown. Domestic-violence rates skyrocketed during the pandemic, with the United Nations reporting that cases increased by 25 to 33 percent globally.¹³ An urgency fueled by violence motivates two modes of reenactment in the film: the rereading of Dworkin’s texts by actresses, and reenactment scenes in which each actress performs. There is a tension, in both instances, between the past and present, as well as between individual and universalized experiences.

The ambition of *My Name Is Andrea* demands that its actresses perform multiple tasks: reading Dworkin’s written texts in voice-over, and reenacting passages from Dworkin’s nonfiction and fictional texts. The voice-overs are most effective in this regard. As the film shifts between texts and acted scenes, as Dworkin’s political writing flows into fictional passages, a slippage emerges between the voices. At moments, I found myself productively uncertain of who was speaking; there were echoes in cadence and timbre as the speakers seemed to channel Dworkin, punctuated by individual emphases and vocal artifacts contributed by each actress.

The embodied performances, though, are difficult to unpack. Each actress plays a version of Dworkin that roughly correlates with their own age (Stenberg appears as a child, Lahti as Dworkin in her later years, and so on). While Judd and Lahti are primarily shown speaking or in reflection, the three youngest performers (Stenberg, Soko, and Riseborough) enact narrative sequences involving explicit acts of violence. As with any representation of sexual trauma, the specificity of a deeply personal experience sits uncomfortably with the relentless sameness of stories about sexual violence against women.

Parmar cites a quotation from Dworkin's memoir, *Heartbreak: A Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant*, that inspired the prismatic structure of her film: "I'm this, I'm that. I'm many things." Or as Dworkin writes in her novel *Mercy*, "Andrea one, two, three, there's more than one."¹⁴ This proliferation of selves is manifested in the roster of performers playing Dworkin, as well as in the range of formats and genres of audiovisual material populating the screen. While multiplication could have created an ambiguous space between performance and reality, however, these reenactments flatten any performative nuances into literalness.

For example, in a central section, Riseborough's Dworkin is shown suffering brutal abuse from her first husband. In voice-over, Riseborough narrates the crushing impact of this violation, and for viewers unfamiliar with Dworkin's fiction, this performance and these words likely appear to be a straightforward depiction of actual events in Dworkin's life. But the text here is drawn from Dworkin's fiction—from *Mercy*—and while many of the events recounted in the novel did occur, the text is purposefully unreliable. Dworkin describes the Andrea of *Mercy* carefully: "[M]y narrator, who is a character in my book, knows less than I do. . . . She is inside the story. Deciding what she will see, what she can know, I am detached from her and cold in how I use her. I do not ever think she is me."¹⁵

Yet there is no signposting when the film's monologue shifts from actual letters to fictional novels. When reenactment reads as transparent representation, the ambiguous space between fictional and real selves dissolves. Without allowing for a temporal, or textual, indeterminacy in the reenactment scenes, the fast-paced film leaves little room for the actresses to play with their own interpretations and translations of the source material.

Dworkin's Presence and Legacy

It is no slight to the actresses in *My Name Is Andrea* to say that few performers could compete with the sheer

force of the actual Dworkin playing herself in the archival footage. Her physical presence is animated by contradiction: anxiety, vulnerability, rage, swagger, fear, hubris, intelligence, intransigence. Captured backstage, nervously waiting to deliver a lecture, or on a talk-show set, fidgeting in her seat, hair untamed, in her signature denim overalls, Dworkin exhibits a profound discomfort in her own skin that is almost unbearable to watch.

Whatever one thinks of Dworkin politically, there is no denying the impact of her material being. Her appearance was subject to relentless misogynistic ridicule in the press, but this, too, speaks to the power of her refusal to conform to bourgeois models of femininity and social compliance. The way Dworkin wears herself, her gestures, her expressions, her stance, all say something about her feminist politics and her humanness in a very singular way. Yet viewers will struggle to tie the footage of Dworkin to the actresses performing "Andrea" in the reenactments. This is not because the actresses don't look like Dworkin (they don't, but that would be too easy), but because the reenactments, while rehearsing Dworkin's words, feel devoid of her imposing presence, her "Dworkinness."

Let me be clear: I'm not suggesting any direct resemblance or facile mimicry. But some kind of dialogue between Dworkin's very specific energy and the entirely different physical presences of her reenactors would have been enriching, particularly if the diverse actresses had been given more space to adapt. Without any connective dialogue, the link between the original and the reenactment is reduced to the seeming transparency of a shared violence, and none of the differences embodied by the actresses seem to matter. Rather than creating an indeterminacy between then and now, which could disrupt stable notions of identity or history, *My Name Is Andrea* leaves viewers only with a unified and foreclosed fate.

Parmar's intense focus on Dworkin as a writer ultimately comes at the expense of her context. Younger viewers, or those unfamiliar with the history of US feminism, likely know that Dworkin is "controversial" but may not know the nuances of that history. Through documentary footage, Parmar shows the flat-footed responses of the mainstream press to Dworkin's theories regarding sexual violence, but spends little time addressing Dworkin's polarizing effect on the feminist movement itself. Indeed, the feminist debates about pornography appear only briefly in a montage of footage from anti-pornography/pro-sex protests and in a mere snippet of an archival interview with Carole S. Vance.¹⁶

This was a strategic decision. Parmar has discussed her decision to decenter feminist debates about pornography

in her film: “Why [the lack of] focus on what feminist and misogynist critics think about Dworkin? Firstly, because there is plenty of pre-existing written material that already does that, and secondly in the context of my film that discussion is not generative.”¹⁷

Her artistic decision has political consequences, though: it positions Dworkin’s radical feminism curiously outside of the history of feminism. Kate Millett’s influence is mentioned, and viewers see (but don’t hear from) women gathering en masse at protests and at conferences (with editing that implies consensus from these audiences in response to Dworkin’s speeches). But there is very little about Dworkin’s collaborations, friendships, or conflicts with other feminist scholars and activists, and no mention of the feminists she bitterly opposed, turned away from, and publicly demeaned throughout her career.¹⁸ There are many Andreas in *My Name Is Andrea*, but they all suffer and work and write in isolation from feminist history.

“What tragic thing happened in your life that made you feel this way?” a young woman asks Dworkin on a television talk show. It is easy to understand how the studio audience at *The Phil Donohue Show* in 1987 would

interpret Dworkin’s discussion of intercourse in the most literal way, and why the mainstream media would twist her sensationalized language into facile, false arguments. But what about the generations of feminists since then who have read, misread, or refused to read Dworkin, for far more complex reasons?

The feminist sex wars of the 1970s (and 1980s and 1990s) reshaped US feminism, sparking painful fracturings. In 1982, the “Scholar and Feminist IX: Towards a Politics of Sexuality” conference at Barnard College became a flash point. The conference, coordinated by Carole S. Vance, brought together roughly eight hundred feminist scholars and activists in an effort to center questions of women’s sexual pleasure and agency. A dramatic protest by Women Against Pornography, targeting lesbian S/M, spun into a decades-long schism often described as a battle between anti-pornography feminists and pro-sex feminists.¹⁹

After the Barnard conflict, Dworkin wrote a letter (unpublished at the time) castigating members of the pro-sex movement, with particular vitriol directed at sex-positive lesbian writers: “[G]oodbye to all you cunts, my sisters, fighting for the right to be humiliated.”²⁰ Dworkin’s standing with pro-sex feminists was further damaged by her testimony before the conservative Meese Report on Pornography in 1986. This action, coupled with the legacy of the Dworkin/MacKinnon anti-pornography ordinance, suggested a dangerous alliance between Dworkin’s brand of radical feminism and the ascendent national conservative politics of the 1980s.²¹ Also, Dworkin’s war against pornography and prostitution coincided with critical organizing in the queer community, galvanized by an evolving lesbian feminist politics of sexuality as well as by the AIDS crisis, where pleasure-focused alternatives to restrictive and punitive heterosexual narratives were necessary for survival.

The resistance to Dworkin’s work from the feminist left, even when due to misreadings, had profoundly different motivations than did the resistance coming from the right. This distinction seems critical to understanding the climate in which Dworkin’s work was produced and consumed, as well as the insights her work might bring to the current moment. More recently, Lorna Bracewell has critiqued the dominant “catfight narrative” that posits the anti-porn/pro-sex battles of the 1980s as “a straightforward, two-sided, and wholly internecine squabble among women.”²² Overlooked, in this narrative, are the contributions of women-of-color feminists to the conference and the post-Barnard debates, as well as the importance of class for many of the participants. Cherríe Moraga observed in her



Andrea Dworkin in 1986.

original response to the Barnard fallout that “the way the movement is breaking down around sex makes me feel that women of color are being played between two white (sector’s) hands. And, I don’t like it.”²³

When thinking about a history of omission, silencing, and misreading in the history of the sex wars, context cannot be easily brushed aside. Dworkin’s own engagement with intersectionality would be made more complicated, perhaps even challenged, if read alongside the voices of feminist, queer women of color actively participating in these conversations.

What might a corrective understanding of Dworkin’s work in the wake of this schism mean for new generations of feminist thinkers and activists? How could Dworkin’s life and texts be reperformed with historical accuracy? These questions strike me as acutely relevant for the audiences of young feminists who are most invested in rethinking Dworkin’s writings and politics—presumably the same audiences who will be most drawn to *My Name Is Andrea*.

These questions are proving increasingly urgent. Andrea Dworkin is having something of a moment with a new generation of feminists. There are hundreds of Dworkin-related TikTok postings where, as of this writing, videos tagged #andreadworkin have over 4.3 million views. Social-media posts about Dworkin reflect a wide range of positions, both positive and negative, some with quite nuanced takes on Dworkin’s writing and her legacy.

If there was ever any ambiguity about the relationship between Dworkin’s radical feminism and the right-wing political movements of the 1980s, there is no question about such alliances today. The feminist movement in the United Kingdom and the United States is in the midst of a new schism, this time between feminisms that incorporate queer, trans, and gender-fluid communities, and those that exclude trans people by adhering to biological definitions of sex and gender; self-described as “gender-critical radical feminists,” adherents of the latter are often described by others as “trans-exclusionary radical feminists” [TERFs] or anti-trans activists.²⁴ Today, Dworkin is persistently invoked as a figurehead for the anti-trans movement.²⁵ Yet there is strong evidence that Dworkin herself supported the trans community, including her correspondence with the anti-trans author Janice Raymond in which she expressed an affinity with the trans resistance to gender binaries.²⁶ To ignore this freighted conflict over Dworkin’s legacy strikes me as deeply problematic.

My Name Is Andrea presents a seductive argument about Dworkin’s writing. But the film’s goal of placing Dworkin in dialogue with the present requires a fuller understanding

of Dworkin’s contribution to the current situation—a contribution that is as significant as it is messy. The singularity of Parmar’s focus excises the many problematic “Andreas” that populate Dworkin’s contested history. As was often the case with her subject’s own writing, Parmar’s insular narrative risks replacing dissent with monologue.

Under Quiet Conditions

Writing on the nature of violence, Jacqueline Rose cites Rosa Luxemburg, the revolutionary who described the “quiet conditions” under which violence thrives.²⁷ Denial and historical amnesia are tools that capitalism, the state, and all those with power use to mask and normalize their crimes, always claiming that the worst of the bad times are over. Even when a buried injustice is brought to light, this rarely results in actual, sustained change, such as in 2019, when Roman Polanski was awarded the Grand Jury Prize in Venice even when the #MeToo movement had rocked the industry and Harvey Weinstein was awaiting trial. If “violence never belongs solely to the present tense,” as Rose argues, that is because it is always a manifestation of the historical brutalities that have enabled its recurrence.²⁸ Cycles of violence will still bear down on future generations who inherit both the violence and the denial.

A new generation of feminists has now inherited the unfinished business of the sex wars, an inheritance that includes both persistent gender-based violence and a significant amount of denial by earlier generations. For many years, I found the sex wars to be an unpleasant and theoretically unsophisticated moment in feminist history, one that I had no interest in revisiting even though I was writing about pornography; I suspect I was not alone in this aversion.

But in the vacuum of this silence arrived a rapid proliferation of new versions of “radical feminism,” understandable skepticism among young women about the potentials of “sexual liberation,” and a return to language and literature from the “war” years. Consider, too, the backlash, even from older feminists, against a perceived puritanical and hysterical generation of privileged youth who embrace victimhood and demand trigger warnings on syllabi. Both tendencies are highly vulnerable to cooptation by the right, whether in the form of regressive anti-sex worker and anti-trans radical feminisms or the deeply flawed “free speech” arguments forwarded by Laura Kipnis, Bari Weiss, and others.²⁹ And throughout, there has reappeared a resistance to genuinely engage with, even listen to, the other.

The Listening Takes

Maria Schneider (like Dworkin) inherited the promise of sexual liberation as a young woman in the 1960s—and its betrayal. The trauma of her public abuse in *Tango*, so early in her career, was difficult to overcome, and she fell into severe depression and addiction. She credited Maria Pia Crapanzano, her life partner of thirty years, for saving her life. But she remained an enigmatic figure throughout her life, a lesbian who came out (then as bisexual) in 1973, a political conservative who distrusted the state, an actress always at odds with the film industry, but also an advocate for women filmmakers who fought to support senior French actors, impoverished when they could no longer work.

Subrin's intervention brings Schneider's subversive resistance to the surface through the *Cinéma cinémas* interview, untangling her identity from her abuse, and tracing the reverberations of this action into the present day. After the release of her single-channel work, *Maria Schneider, 1983*, Subrin staged *The Listening Takes* with much of the same material, but this time as an immersive multimedia installation. At Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery, where I saw it, three large screens dominated a darkened space, each featuring, on one side, the actresses' takes, in rotation, with Issa's reels on the front, Maïga in the middle, and Sandoval on the last screen.

The screens are staggered and shifting toward the right, such that a viewer positioned at the front of the room can see all three screens simultaneously. The backs of the screens are covered with a grid of mirrors, a massive rendition of the mirror in the original interview, marked at first by age and discoloration, then less degraded, and finally pristine, rescued from aging. For the viewer, the faces of the actresses are reflected onto the mirrors facing each screen. It is as if, as Subrin observed, each performer "speaks on the back of the actress that came before her."³⁰ And indeed new footage is added to each of the other screens to show each nonspeaking actress listening and reacting to the performance of the speaker, in real time. After each performs alone, a fourth cycle projects the performances simultaneously.

The impact of the installation is markedly different than the experience of watching the single-channel *Maria Schneider, 1983*. The precision of Subrin's staging is not fully revealed until the reels are played synchronously—when, despite the variations, each reenactment was timed so that its anchoring moments (a movement, a statement, a sound) would align with corresponding moments in the other reenactments. The voices of the actresses, speaking slightly out of time and using different phrases or languages, overwhelm the installation in a cacophony as they drift apart and then snap back into sync.

Writ large across the screens, the gestures and expressions of each actress create a choreography with each other, in both the synchronized and "listening" cycles. The focus



The Listening Takes at Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery. Photo by Mike Cohea.

on minutiae, particularly when layered across channels, creates a tension between difference and repetition: the sameness of the frustration and anger, the differences that are both embodied and temporal. The inhabitation each actress performs becomes an exercise in empathy.

The conversation that emerges between the performances and the screens implicates the viewer in direct ways. Navigating the installation, watching each performer speak or listen, the viewer sees herself too. It was deeply affecting to have this experience in a hushed space, surrounded by other visitors, all intently focused on the speakers' words. When visiting *The Listening Takes* I was struck by a realization: in all my years of filmgoing, I can't recall ever devoting this much time and attention to watching women listening to other women talking.

The silencing of rape culture demands a collective rage, as *My Name Is Andrea* makes clear; but without reflection, without radical listening (to which Subrin contributes), there is no space for healing or for political transformation.

Notes

1. Joseph Fahim, "The Swimmers: Lead Actor Hits Out at Orientalist Cliches and Mistreatment," *Middle East Eye*, December 29, 2022, www.middleeasteye.net/discover/netflix-swimmers-lead-actor-manal-issa-hits-out-orientalist-cliches-mistreatment.
2. "Last Tango in Paris' Rape Scene Was Not Consensual, Bernardo Bertolucci Admits," *Variety*, December 3, 2016, <https://variety.com/2016/film/news/last-tango-in-paris-rape-scene-consensual-bernardo-bertolucci-1201933117/>.
3. Ivone Margulies, *In Person: Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 253.
4. Margulies, 260–61.
5. Margulies, 6.
6. Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, "Maria Was Saying Things in 1983 That Were Not Addressed by Actresses until Decades Later: Elisabeth Subrin on Her Cannes-Premiering Short, *Maria Schneider, 1983*," *Filmmaker Magazine*, May 26, 2022, <https://filmmaker-magazine.com/114750-elisabeth-subrin-maria-schneider-1983/>.
7. Subrin's blog, "Who Cares about Actresses," chronicled the work of feminist actresses, ending after the release of her film *A Woman, A Part* (2016) and just as the #MeToo movement hit Hollywood. See Elisabeth Subrin, *Who Cares about Actresses*, <https://whocaresaboutactresses.tumblr.com/>.
8. The impact of the Dworkin-MacKinnon Ordinance, which Dworkin cowrote with Catharine MacKinnon, is complex and contested. The ordinance never became law in the United States. But the premise of the argument influenced a Canadian case, *R v. Butler* (1992), which prohibited explicit sexual material that involved exploitation or dehumanization. Shortly thereafter, Canadian customs seized media and books by women, gay men, and lesbians.
9. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Dworkin are transcribed from the film.
10. Joe Bond, "My Name Is Andrea," *London Magazine*, <https://the-londonmagazine.org/review-my-name-is-andrea-by-joe-bond/>.
11. Dana Glaser, "Andrea Dworkin, *Last Days at Hot Slit*," *Chicago Review*, July 28, 2021, www.chicagoreview.org/andrea-dworkin-last-days-at-hot-slit/.
12. See Glaser; also see Johanna Fateman's introduction to Andrea Dworkin, *Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin*, ed. Johanna Fateman and Amy Scholder (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2019), 34–35.
13. UN Women, *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during COVID-19*, November 4, 2021, <https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Measuring-shadow-pandemic.pdf>.
14. Andrea Dworkin, *Mercy* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 318.
15. Andrea Dworkin, "My Life in Writing," in *Last Days at Hot Slit*, 311.
16. Carole S. Vance is an anthropologist who coordinated the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality, which challenged anti-pornography feminism. She edited the landmark collection *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), based on the conference proceedings.
17. Alexandra Juhasz, "'I'm This. I'm That. I'm Many Things': Pratibha Parmar on Andrea Dworkin and 'My Name Is Andrea,'" *Ms.*, October 21, 2022, <https://msmagazine.com/2022/10/21/pratibha-parmar-andrea-dworkin-my-name-is-andrea/>.
18. Susie Bright, one of the feminists Dworkin attacked, wrote a eulogy that beautifully and generously contextualizes Dworkin's legacy. Susie Bright, "Andrea Dworkin Has Died," *Susie Bright's Journal* (blog), April 11, 2005, https://susiebright.blogs.com/susie_brights_journal/_/2005/04/andrea_dworkin.html.
19. For more on the conference issues, see Heather Love, "Diary of a Conference on Sexuality, 1982," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 1 (2011): 49–51.
20. Andrea Dworkin, "Goodbye to All This," in *Last Days at Hot Slit*, 214.
21. Dworkin and MacKinnon issued a statement in 1994 denying that their ordinance had any direct link to *R v. Butler* or the homophobic seizures. Yet MacKinnon publicly applauded *Butler*, and legal scholars have argued that the Dworkin-MacKinnon

- premise had a profound impact on censorship in Canada. See Tamar Lewin, "Canada Court Says Pornography Harms Women," *New York Times*, February 28, 1992, www.nytimes.com/1992/02/28/news/canada-court-says-pornography-harms-women.html; Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, "Statement regarding Canadian Customs and Legal Approaches to Pornography," press release, August 26, 1994, www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/OrdinanceCanada.html; and Human Rights Watch, "A Ruling Inspired by U.S. Anti-Pornography Activists Is Used to Restrict Lesbian and Gay Publications in Canada," February 1994, www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/CANADA942.PDF.
22. Lorna N. Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars: Sexual Freedom in the #MeToo Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 5.
 23. Cherríe Moraga, "Barnard Sexuality Conference: Played Between White Hands," *Off Our Backs* 12, no. 7 (July 1982): 23.
 24. The organizing and funding behind the global war against "gender ideology" is well documented: it is propelled by right-wing think tanks such as the Alliance Defending Freedom and ecofascist organizations such as the Deep Green Resistance. See Jude Ellison S. Doyle, "How the Far-Right Is Turning Feminists into Fascists," *Xtra*, April 1, 2022, <https://xtramagazine.com/power/far-right-feminist-fascist-220810>.
 25. J. K. Rowling has tweeted Dworkin quotations to support her own anti-trans views. Etsy and Redbubble "radfem" sellers (e.g. "Womanation" and "XXRebellion") offer Dworkin-related merchandise, including "Andrea Dworkin was right" throw pillows and "Not the Fun Kind" pins. Quoting Dworkin, one anti-trans activist mused on the conundrum of supporting the "theocratic fascist" Matt Walsh and his anti-trans propaganda film *What Is a Woman?* (2022) and thus collaborating with the extreme right, suggesting that the ends might justify the means. See Josephine Bartosch, "Should Feminism Work with the Right?," *4W*, June 6, 2022, <https://4w.pub/should-feminists-work-with-the-right/>.
 26. See Martin Duberman, *Andrea Dworkin: The Feminist as Revolutionary* (New York: New Press, 2020), 160–61. In 2020, Dworkin's longtime partner, John Stoltenberg, published an essay on Dworkin's trans allyship, repudiating the use of her work by anti-trans activists. See John Stoltenberg, "Andrea Dworkin Was a Trans Ally," *Boston Review*, April 8, 2020, www.bostonreview.net/articles/john-stoltenberg-andrew-dworkin-was-trans-ally/.
 27. Jacqueline Rose, *On Violence and on Violence against Women* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 6–7.
 28. Rose, 30.
 29. For the latter, see Laura Kipnis, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* (New York: Harper, 2017); and Bari Weiss, "Aziz Ansari Is Guilty. Of Not Being a Mind Reader," *New York Times*, January 15, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/01/15/opinion/aziz-ansari-babe-sexual-harassment.html.
 30. Elisabeth Subrin, remarks at the opening of *The Listening Takes* at the David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, RI, February 9, 2023.