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On *Variety*: The Avant-Garde between Pornography and Narrative

by KEVIN L. FERGUSON

Abstract: This article analyzes Bette Gordon's first feature film *Variety* (1983), reassessing how experimental novelist Kathy Acker's contributions to the screenplay awkwardly positioned the film within contemporary cultural debates over pornography and the future of avant-garde filmmaking. While centered on an erotic thriller narrative concerning a woman's entrée into the scuzzy world of New York City porno theaters, Gordon and Acker also take up in the film a series of three related representational problems for the 1980s: feminist approaches to pornography, narrative in an avant-garde tradition, and the role of speech and writing in film.

Introduction: The Pleasure in Looking. Speaking recently about her first feature film *Variety* (1983), director Bette Gordon called it “a story about cinema in a way because it’s about the pleasure in looking.”¹ Centered on a woman who takes a job selling tickets at a seedy Times Square porno theater, *Variety* is certainly about the pleasures and dangers of the visual image, but Gordon’s comment underemphasizes another crucial aspect of the film: its talkativeness. While a few critics at the time drew positive comparison to Alfred Hitchcock thrillers like *Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1958), most dismissed the film on release, pointing particularly to the long dialogue scenes that interrupted the film’s more exciting narrative aspects: “The low points of the movie are the barroom ‘rap sessions,’ in which assorted B-girls tell stories about running after men and being entrapped by the police.”² For those familiar with her work, those scenes would seem unmistakably to be the contribution of experimental novelist Kathy Acker, who is credited with writing the screenplay. This article investigates Acker’s contribution to *Variety*, specifically how her work on the screenplay positioned the film within then-heated cultural debates over pornography and the future of avant-garde filmmaking. After

1 Elena Oumano, *Cinema Today: A Conversation with Thirty-Nine Filmmakers from around the World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 7.

2 David Edelstein, “Review of *Variety*, Horizon Films,” *Village Voice*, March 19, 1985, 55.

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contextualizing the theoretical and historical milieu around *Variety* and describing the relevant avant-garde and pornography debates, I analyze the film in light of new research at the Kathy Acker Papers, held in the special collections at Duke University's Rubenstein Library, particularly sixty-six typescript pages of Acker's notes for *Variety*. Bette Gordon also met with me and graciously allowed me access to her copy of the script, along with other archival material. By analyzing Acker's contributions in this context, I show how *Variety* is an avant-garde film uniquely caught between pornography and narrative.

In revisiting the film from the perspective of Acker's trajectory of work, we can better account for its surprising narrative strategies, which even some dismissive critics at the time admitted they might be misunderstanding. For Gordon, *Variety* marked a conflicted transition from her earlier avant-garde films toward an interest in narrative and genre filmmaking. In a 1982 interview Gordon explicitly discusses this conflict: rather than turn her back on narrative film or pursue an anti-narrative stance in *Variety*, she sought to recuperate narrative and use it in a new way, finding a filmmaking practice somewhere between the "simple story with beginning, middle, and end" of Hollywood and the "disjunctive tableaux" favored by avant-garde cinema.³ The result was a version of "the new talkie," which James Peterson defines as "a genre of avant-garde filmmaking in which writing and speech become increasingly prominent," although *Variety* was a curious example, since he called it a "New Talkie without the theoretical talk."⁴ Seeing critics at the time struggle with challenges of definition and reception emphasizes the importance of reconsidering *Variety*'s historical moment and its role in disrupting supposed boundaries between avant-garde and narrative cinema.

This grappling with writing and speech in film narrative in the middle of debates about avant-garde filmmaking culture is only one of the problems that Gordon's film posed to viewers. The other problem is that her film landed squarely in the middle of contemporary battles about pornography, particularly the question for the feminist filmmaking community of whether it was even possible to show or watch pornography without replicating oppressive, hierarchical power relationships. As Steve Jenkins notes in an early review of *Variety*, "[a] certain kind of feminist puritan would see the very subject of pornography as taboo, and thus block any consideration of the issues which the film . . . explore[s]."⁵ Thus, for some feminists, the very idea of *Variety* was an outrage.

Combining these two problems is the figure of Kathy Acker, whom Gordon selected to write *Variety*'s screenplay on the basis of a treatment by Gordon. In many ways, Acker was the perfect collaborator for Gordon, since their work shared many thematic concerns, but in other respects, Acker's radical writing style worked at odds with Gordon's interest in making a new kind of narrative film. While Gordon was transitioning from the avant-garde into narrative filmmaking, Acker was moving from autobiographical narrative to a more experimental style of pornographic, cut-up

3 Bette Gordon and Karen Kay, "Women Looking at Other Women," *BOMB* 1, no. 2 (1982): 52.

4 James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 124, 181.

5 Steve Jenkins, "Review of *Variety*, Horizon Films," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1984, 138.

plagiarism, as with her breakthrough novel *Great Expectations* (1982), which pretends to rewrite Dickens's classic before subverting entirely the traditional concept of literary narrative. So, on the one hand, it made all the sense in the world for a young experimental filmmaker to invite a rising experimental novelist to collaborate on a screenplay, but on the other hand, Acker and Gordon's collaboration is difficult to recuperate alongside their diverging interests in narrative at the time. This conflict comes to a head in the ending that Acker wrote for *Variety* but that Gordon did not film, despite Acker's friendly threat, "If you cut a word out of the speech in the last scene I slice off your head."⁶

For readers unfamiliar with the film, here is a brief summary: Christine (Sandy McLeod) is an aspiring writer unable to find any work in New York City. Desperate, she jumps when her friend Nan mentions a job selling tickets at *Variety*, a pornographic theater in Times Square. There, her curiosity brings her into contact with Louie (Richard Davidson), a distinguished-looking patron with a mysterious air. He takes her on a date to a baseball game, but when he abruptly leaves on business she decides surreptitiously to follow him (Figure 1). Over the following few days she continues to do so, tracking him from Fulton Street to the Staten Island Ferry to a motel in Asbury, New Jersey.

Christine's boyfriend Mark (Will Patton), a journalist investigating connections between unions and the mafia at Fulton Fish Market, becomes increasingly uncomfortable with her as she gets more and more involved in both following Louie and in exploring the world of Times Square sex shops. Ultimately, Christine confronts Louie with the information she has gathered on his activities, arranging a meeting with him on the corner of Fulton and South Streets.

The film ends ambivalently with an empty shot of that corner, the cobblestones wet and bare under a single streetlight.



Figure 1. Sandy McLeod in *Variety* (Horizon Films, 1983), presented as a feminist update of Kim Novak from *Vertigo* (Paramount Pictures, 1958).

"A Frother Whose Anger Would Bind All These Theories Together." A very particular set of industrial alignments laid the ground for *Variety*'s production and the involvement of Kathy Acker. Funding for *Variety*'s \$80,000 budget came from a disparate mixture of sources: half the budget was from the West German television station

6 Kathy Acker, "Kathy's Changes to Film," 43, Kathy Acker Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University.

ZDF, \$25,000 from the New York State Council on the Arts, roughly \$15,000 from Britain's Channel 4, and \$5,000 to \$10,000 from a small investor.⁷ Shooting began in October 1981, but when the ZDF money ran out, the production had to secure additional funding before restarting production in January 1982. As an example of the contingencies of independent film production at the time, which had not yet hardened into a formalized business model, Gordon described to me how fortuitous it was for a South American businessman to surprise the producers with an offer to buy the film rights for then-new video distribution. Simultaneously, she had been invited to show the film at Cannes but did not have the money to meet their requirement to blow the film up from 16mm to 35mm. Only the video sale allowed that to happen.

In 1982, the *New York Times* excitedly described ZDF's Das kleine Fernsehspiel Workshop, which commissioned subsidized work from new directors, seeking out "filmmakers who tend to explore unusual themes and who often invent fresh approaches to capture them."⁸ ZDF provided a minimal budget but gave full creative control to filmmakers. As the article relates it, these projects were a labor of love for Das kleine Fernsehspiel's central figure Eckart Stein, who "poked around the art-film communities in SoHo and Tribeca . . . willingly endure[ing] the straight-backed chairs of the Collective for Living Cinema and other downtown screening rooms" before discovering Gordon's *Empty Suitcases* (1980) and commissioning a work from her "dealing with voyeurism and pornography."⁹ Thomas Elsaesser offers a larger context for Das kleine Fernsehspiel's magnanimity, noting the effect in 1974 of the Television Framework Agreement, which required West German television stations not only to coproduce films but also to broadcast theatrically released films.¹⁰ As Elsaesser points out, this arrangement mutually satisfied both the aspiring young directors, who received budgets larger than they might otherwise attract, and ZDF, who could at worst be sure to fill their programming slots cheaply and at best to discover new talent or produce films that won film festival awards. Elsaesser notes that by investing in "the whole spectrum from avant-garde experiment to social case history," Das kleine Fernsehspiel "democratized the differences between formal avant-garde and fictional narrative."¹¹ By this account, Das kleine Fernsehspiel was the perfect opportunity for Gordon, as it gave her a budget, creative control, a larger audience for her work, and a context that was already collapsing supposed distinctions between the avant-garde and narrative film. Indeed, discussing *Empty Suitcases* and the consequences of Reaganomics, J. Hoberman had already predicted "a closing of the ranks between avant-garde and social documentary filmmakers," which in fact production models like ZDF's explicitly encouraged.¹²

7 Gary Bradford also reports an additional \$30,000 of postproduction costs in "Despite Rising Film Aid, Independents Scrimp," *New York Times*, January 30, 1986, C15.

8 Kathleen Hulser, "A TV Workshop That Relishes Risk," *New York Times*, August 15, 1982, 17.

9 Ibid.

10 Thomas Elsaesser, "Television and the Author's Cinema: ZDF's Das Kleine Fernsehspiel," in *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 211.

11 Ibid., 217.

12 J. Hoberman, "Body Politics," *Village Voice*, December 2, 1981, 62.

Furthermore, *Variety* demonstrates a spirit of collaboration that characterized the early 1980s downtown NYC scene, “a heady time of collaboration and riotous creative energy” when artists often crossed media to work with each other: painters turned actors, actors turned musicians, musicians turned filmmakers.¹³ In addition to giving small roles to downtown artists like Nan Goldin, Cookie Mueller, and Spalding Gray, Gordon also made an interesting decision in asking Kathy Acker to write the screenplay. Known primarily for her experimental novels, Acker already had a varied career that intersected in a number of ways with visual arts and music scenes. By 1981 she had published four novels, won a Pushcart Prize, and was teaching in the Video and Performance Department of the San Francisco Art Institute. She wrote for *Artforum*, collaborated with rock band The Mekons, and wrote two opera librettos, one directed by Richard Foreman. *Variety* was her first and only film script credit, although she displayed an interest in film and video throughout her career: P. Adams Sitney (whom she briefly dated in the mid-1960s) introduced her to Stan Brakhage, Stan Rice, Gregory Markopoulos, and Jack Smith in the early 1960s; she made an experimental pornographic video *The Blue Tape* with Alan Sondheim in 1974; she acted in Raúl Ruiz’s *The Golden Boat* (1990); and her fiction often drew on films and filmmakers, as in her short story “Florida” (1976), which parodies John Huston’s 1948 *Key Largo*, and her novel *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini* (written 1982, published 1984), about the murdered Italian director.¹⁴

At the time that Gordon met her, Acker had already begun to establish a body of work but had not yet met with much critical success. In a recent interview, Gordon recalls meeting Acker in New York City at the performance space the Kitchen (likely reading from *Great Expectations*), and elsewhere Gordon describes her fascination at one of Acker’s London performances (likely an early version of “The Meaning of the Eighties”).¹⁵ Their attraction is not surprising when we consider the similarity in their conceptual interests, such as innocent female protagonists who navigate a world of male power by engaging with taboo; a constant estrangement from mothers who are replaced by oppressive institutions of female authority; and a working thesis that capitalism and patriarchy dehumanize, objectivize, and fetishize women as objects. For Gordon, Acker’s real-world experience working in Times Square sex shows and her radical use of experimental language to explore identity would have lent an authenticity to the screenplay, mirroring Gordon’s own uneasy balance of traditional narrative and experimental form. Gordon’s film also encourages this strategy of carefully invoking the autobiographical while maintaining a defense against reading fiction too literally. While Gordon might have claimed that her film was motivated by “an attraction

13 James Crump further describes this collaboration in an essay accompanying Nan Goldin’s book of set photographs in “Variety: Nan Goldin, Indie Filmmaking, and the Lower East Side 1978–1988,” in *Variety: Photographs by Nan Goldin* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2009), 123.

14 Kathy Acker, “Devoured by Myths: An Interview with Sylvère Lotringer,” in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1991), 3.

15 Kofi Forson, “Interview with Bette Gordon,” *White Hot Magazine*, August 2010, <http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/2010-interview-with-bette-gordon/2119>.

to . . . the image of [sleaze] rather than the reality,” the documentary quality of the NYC locations confronts viewers with a resonating sense of urban reality.¹⁶

In 1981, at the behest of Tim Burns (who worked as an assistant director on *Variety*), Gordon made a “precursor” to *Variety, Anybody’s Woman* (twenty-five minutes). Filmed in Super 8 in front of the Variety Theater, Gordon asked her friends Nancy Reilly and Spalding Gray simply to describe pornographic fantasies for the camera. The film became the seed for *Variety*, and Gordon in 1984 described her and Acker’s working relationship like this: “I wrote the story, then gave it to Kathy Acker, and she wrote a kind of ‘Kathy Acker’ short story, which I rewrote into a film. She then did some of the dialogue, like the conversations between the men and the scene in the limousine, and the sex monologues.”¹⁷ To me, Gordon recounted a much more open writing process than one finds in independent production today: “It was all just ideas, and I could take what I wanted. I gave Kathy script credit, although she had no idea how to write a screenplay.” Even a quick glance at the script notes I discuss below confirms how unfamiliar Acker was with screenwriting conventions or the possibilities of filmmaking.

Acker is named in the film’s opening credits as “SCRIPT BY: KATHY ACKER BASED ON AN ORIGINAL STORY BY: BETTE GORDON.”¹⁸ However, Acker is mentioned in only eighteen of the twenty-six reviews of *Variety* from 1983 to 1985 that I was able to examine, and in only eight of these is she discussed beyond a listing of her name in the capsule of film credits. Most of the reviews that list Acker in the capsule describe the relationship the same way the opening credits do (although one has her cowriting the screenplay and another gives all the credit to Gordon).¹⁹ It is not particularly uncommon for a writer to be overlooked in a film review (and some of these reviews are from French and Italian newspapers to which Acker was unknown), but looking at how Acker’s contributions were characterized provides insight into her growing reputation and how only a certain segment of viewers would have been primed to recognize what an “Acker script” would sound like.

Of the reviews that do discuss Acker, most do so negatively, even those that claim to understand her body of work. John Coleman calls Acker “a name-about-town [who] wrote the dreadful dialogue”; Valerie Ellis writes that she’s “best known for her flip, talky [*sic*] novels about pornography from a female point of view”; Linda Dubler labels Acker “an author whose fiction is distinguished by a darkly perverse sexual vision”; Dan Walworth notes her matter-of-fact descriptive style; and Janet Maslin attacks Acker by calling the screenplay “painfully underwritten.”²⁰ David Edelstein

16 Gordon and Kay, “Women Looking at Other Women,” 67.

17 Jane Root, “Women X . . . : An Interview with Bette Gordon,” *Monthly Film Bulletin* 51, no. 604 (1984): 139.

18 Two other names appear in the credits as “screenplay assistance”: Jerry Delamater and Peter Koper. Delamater helped order the scenes for shooting from the script. Koper was a journalist who wrote dialogue for Will Patton to speak in the Mafia sequences.

19 See, respectively, Leonard Klady, “Reviewed from Toronto Fest: *Variety*,” *Variety*, September 21, 1983, 22; and Christine Noll Brinckmann, “Der weibliche Blick: Ein Interview mit Bette Gordon,” *Frauen und Film* 36 (1984): 88–93.

20 John Coleman, “Review of *Variety*, Horizon Films,” *New Statesman*, May 25, 1984, 29; Valerie Ellis, “Some Like It Hot,” *Afterimage*, November 1984, 18; Linda Dubler, “Review of *Variety*, Horizon Films,” *Film Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1984): 24; Dan Walworth, “A Partial Report from the 34th International Berlin Film Festival,” *Millennium*

thinks that Gordon gave the story to “punk author/exhibitionist Kathy Acker, thinking Acker would dredge up juicy, fetid stuff from an apparently bottomless pit.”²¹ Curiously, Edelstein sees Acker as Gordon’s “opposite—a frother whose anger and emotion would bind all these theories together” (Figures 2 and 3).²² While Edelstein tries to account for the film’s unexpected juxtapositions, he is mistaken in contrasting an “emotional Acker” with a “theoretical Gordon,” primarily since an essential aspect of both artists’ work is to show that theory and emotion are not mutually exclusive. While I have the benefit of hindsight here in disagreeing with Edelstein’s assessment, his explanation demonstrates my argument that the alliance between Gordon and Acker was difficult to account for at the time because together the two occupied a uniquely challenging approach to the relationship between pornography and narrative. In mistakenly assigning too much of the dialogue to Acker, reviewers like Edelstein failed to grasp the collaborative nature of Gordon and Acker’s relationship and relied too much on the false assumption that Gordon was restricted to her theoretical avant-garde background.

In fact, rather ironically, given her reputation, Acker intentionally chose not to write most of the dialogue for the realistic, conversational scenes in the film. For example, despite the prevalence of maternal themes in all of her work, Acker insisted that the phone conversation Christine has with her mother “HAS to be a conversation between you and your mother that you Bette feel.”²³ Likewise, when Christine first goes on a date with Louie, “the conversation here must be *real*,” and for one line of dialogue Acker instructs McLeod simply to pick a favorite novelist and “rap really about why you like his stuff. The point is the conversation is REAL. It goes on to real conversation about yourself. Just what you want to tell someone who you’re really beginning to be friends with.”²⁴ In the bar scenes at Tin Pan Alley, Gordon recounts, the women were filmed simply telling their own nonfictions: Nora’s story about getting busted for the bottle of champagne and Sally’s story about the woman ripping off her wig. I agree with Gordon’s assessment that since “they were recounting what really happened to them . . . in a way, they are more narrative than anything Kathy wrote.” Acker, whose early work was often copied directly from her own diaries, obviously understood her role less as providing the genuine, authentic voice of Christine and more as a collaborative influence on directing the actors.

If Gordon and others were more responsible for the dialogue than the story credit admits, is it the case that her film ventriloquized Acker better than Acker could have done herself? In a conversation with me, Gordon also stressed the importance of collaborating with producer Renée Shafransky, not mentioned in any reviews, who helped to “take the essential Kathy” and distill elements of her feminist punk persona for the

Film Journal, nos. 14–15 (1984–1985), 168; Janet Maslin, “Review of *Variety*, Horizon Films,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1985, C10.

21 Edelstein, “Review of *Variety*,” 55.

22 *Ibid.*

23 Acker, “Kathy’s Changes,” 12.

24 *Ibid.*, 16–17.



Figure 2. Kathy Acker working out circa 1984 (Courtesy Steve Pyke).



Figure 3. Bette Gordon at *Variety*'s editing table (Courtesy Bette Gordon).

purposes of the film. Distilling Acker's persona into the character of Christine included specific autobiographical touches like scenes of weightlifting (an Acker obsession) and Christine's work in the pornography industry (a detail of Acker's biography), but mostly Acker's persona is evident in the vulnerable mixture of female innocence and experience captured by McLeod's performance. The one day that Acker visited the set, Gordon recounts, she looked at McLeod and said, "She's perfect." Thus, even with numerous places in the script where Gordon ignored Acker's vision and language, Acker nonetheless easily recognized her own Christine in McLeod.

A New Talkie without the Theoretical Talk. Gordon's avant-garde bona fides were well established by the time she made *Variety*. She worked in a range of roles (from ticket taker to educational director) at the Collective for Living Cinema, which, along with Anthology Film Archives, was the nucleus for avant-garde and experimental cinema in New York City in

the 1970s and 1980s. She was a longtime contributor to *BOMB* magazine. Her *Empty Suitcases* was included in the 1981 Whitney Museum Biennial. She was programmed in a 1984 show at the New Museum of Contemporary Art alongside Yvonne Rainer, Chantal Akerman, Marguerite Duras, Valie Export, Laura Mulvey, and Peter Wollen.²⁵ But with *Variety*, Gordon made a departure from the more conventionally avant-garde work seen in her earlier short films *Noyes* (1976), *An Algorithm* (1977), *Exchanges* (1978), and *Empty Suitcases*. The critical discourse of the time was dominated by Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and this version of theoretical feminism influenced the earliest appreciation of Gordon's work by fellow filmmaker Karyn Kay, who argues that Gordon's films explore elements "which make up the cinematic and which have traditionally entrapped the female image in an eroticized circulation of identification and representation. The method of investigation involves an analysis of narrative structuring processes and the concomitant problems of

25 "Notice," *Variety*, November 28, 1984, 22.

voyeurism and spectacle.”²⁶ In other words, Kay argues that Gordon’s work has more to do with how narrative works in film than with particular narratives themselves. According to this line of thought, the process by which classical film narratives structure a viewer’s response results in a scopophilic problem of voyeurism and spectacle that Mulvey summarizes in the axiom: “Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look.”²⁷ Gordon, then, was interested in general in the way that cinematic narrative conventions worked to contain the female image and with *Variety* in particular whether or not it was possible to circumvent that primary effect of classical film narrative that rendered film women as simply images to be looked at.²⁸ That is, she wanted to make a film with classical narrative strategies but without the misogynist effects of those strategies.

In many respects, the intellectual problem of narrative that Gordon confronted is the same one she faced with pornography: is it possible for a feminist to work with the formal structuring processes of narrative or pornography without also endorsing the negative social or political effects of narrative and pornography? This question is further complicated by the historical problem of the avant-garde tradition that Gordon was working in. It is worth briefly outlining the stakes for such a pro-narrative position in the context of the late 1970s avant-garde community.

With all of her earlier filmmaking practice and reputation rooted in the avant-garde, *Variety*’s embrace of narrative posed problems for Gordon. Indeed, as reviewer Linda Dubler noted, “[i]n certain intellectual circles, Gordon’s embrace of conventional, manipulative narrativity may be as heretical as her flirtation with smut is for antiporn feminists,” and “the cynical among us may claim that the until-now determinedly avant-garde Gordon has sacrificed her artistic integrity.”²⁹ The most vocal critics of the heresy of avant-garde filmmakers using “conventional, manipulative narrativity” were Lisa Cartwright and Nina Fonoroff. In 1983 they took independent filmmakers to task for believing that “dominant cinema must be criticized *from within* (through further narrative work) in order to undermine its politically repressive impact” (an attack Gordon felt personally and addressed in an interview with Coco Fusco).³⁰ Instead, they called for a radical feminist experimental cinema that would break with narrative entirely, focusing their criticism on a number of common strategies that merely disrupted narrative, such as quotation (“often taking the form of written or spoken text within the film”), “thwarting character development,” disjunctive or interrupted

26 Karyn Kay, “The Incomplete Act as the Significant Act: Notes on the Films of Bette Gordon,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 2, no. 5 (1980): 81. Laura Mulvey’s essay is, of course, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

27 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 11.

28 Dubler, “Review of *Variety*,” 27.

29 *Ibid.*, 28.

30 Cartwright and Fonoroff had written disparagingly about “Bette Gordon’s move from *Empty Suitcases* (1980), a film (falsely) heralded as both experimental and feminist, [to] her highly funded production *Variety* (1983), a disjunctive narrative about pornography,” in Lisa Cartwright and Nina Fonoroff, “Narrative Is Narrative: So What Is New?,” in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice Welsch (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 128. Gordon addressed the controversy in her interview with Coco Fusco, “*Variety*: Between Female Desire and the Female Image: An Interview with Bette Gordon by Coco Fusco,” *Idiolects*, Spring 1985, 61–66.

narratives, and “blurring” diegetic and nondiegetic elements.³¹ Indeed, we find each of these four strategies emphasized in *Variety*, which has long pornographic recitations, a protagonist who does not develop so much as drift, enigmatic scenes with an abruptly mysterious ending, and a blurred mixture of fiction and documentary in its New York City locations.

Cartwright and Fonoroff’s intervention came at a time when a division in North American experimental cinema was hardening between the art world and the film industry, captured by the title of Peter Wollen’s 1975 essay “The Two Avant-Gardes,” which argues that nonnarrative traditions were inferior to industrial techniques used by filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet.³² One particular nonnarrative tradition that was felt to have run its course was the academic structural film, exemplified by *Wavelength* (Michael Snow, 1967). Coined in 1969 by P. Adams Sitney, the structural film was characterized by its stripped-down simplicity, involving four characteristics: a “fixed camera position . . . the flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography off the screen.”³³ An alternative trajectory was found in the tongue-in-cheek “new talkie,” a term coined by Annette Michelson. Rather than structural film’s move toward a purer formal simplicity, the new talkie instead became more theoretically complex and talkative. Two well-known examples are *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 1977) and *Thriller* (Sally Potter, 1979). The new talkie was doubly informed by cutting-edge theory and classical film narrative, and according to James Peterson, this counterintuitively made those films more, not less, narrative: “Since contemporary film theory was then generally pitched at commercial narrative filmmaking, rather than the avant-garde, New Talkies . . . were more generally narrative than the Structural film.”³⁴ Peterson also offers another, more pragmatic reason for an avant-garde turn away from structural film toward narrative: narratives were a way for avant-garde filmmakers “to reach larger audiences, for reasons both personal and political,” a motivation that Gordon herself admitted: “I want more people to see my films. I want them to be more accessible on a certain level.”³⁵ In this way, Peterson positions *Variety* and *Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden, 1983) as “New Talkies without the theoretical talk,” proposing that we see them not as a uniquely new form of avant-garde cinema but as an intersection of the avant-garde with modernist cinema.³⁶

Gordon’s working thesis in *Variety* was that “for women who are dealing with the question of representation in film, . . . narrative allow[s] for a lot more investigation of problems of women, rather than the abstract imagery that also has been used in films by and about women.”³⁷ In her essay on Gordon’s early short films, Kay had

31 Cartwright and Fonoroff, “Narrative Is Narrative,” 131–136.

32 Peter Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes,” *Studio International* 190, no. 978 (1975): 171–175.

33 P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 348.

34 Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos*, 180.

35 *Ibid.*, 181. Gordon’s response is in Fusco, “*Variety*,” 65.

36 Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos*, 181–182.

37 Gordon and Kay, “Women Looking at Other Women,” 52.

already identified the important theme of Gordon's work: "The variability of woman's discourse, her position within language and within representation."³⁸ The "incompleteness" Kay describes is in fact Gordon's initial strategy for working with narrative. Because narrative is defined "as the illusory fixing of the female image, on display for the erotic fantasy of the viewer," Gordon must keep her narratives incomplete so as not to "entra[p] the female image in an eroticized circulation of identification and representation" that has been the traditional mode of cinema.³⁹ Kay particularly points to the strategy of repetition that "provides a tension, a drive toward conclusion" that Gordon refuses to provide.⁴⁰ As we will see with her script notes, repetition was also an important textual strategy for Acker: both Gordon and Acker used narrative repetition to propel a story forward, but both undermined conventional narrative by not resolving this repetition.

Central to *Variety*'s analysis of women's role in narrative film is Gordon's investigation of women's position within language. Speech and writing recur thematically throughout: Christine wants to be a writer, her boyfriend is an investigative reporter, her answering machine speaks disembodied messages, the porno film soundtrack invades the theater lobby, the camera repeatedly returns to the neon writing of Times Square, Christine loiters in a porno book shop, she and her friends tell each other stories in moments of feminist bonding. This theme is drawn into sharp focus in three monologue scenes where Christine recites, trancelike, pornographic vignettes to her boyfriend Mark. In all three, Christine describes graphic pornographic scenes with a far-off look while her boyfriend remains unresponsive, helpless to stop Christine or make sense of her abrupt tonal shift. For example, in the first recitation, Christine abruptly switches from a description of the working conditions of the theater to a description of sex:

When the doors do open, the smell of Lysol comes out and it really stinks. . . . Most of the seats there are either broken or really uncomfortable. And then inside on the screen, a woman reaches up and unties the neck strap of her halter. Half-turning, she steps out of her panties. She licks her lips and rubs her nipple until it's stiff. "Fuck me," she says.

Even as these scenes seem to stand out uncomfortably from the surrounding narrative, they in fact simply illustrate the strangeness of hearing a woman speak dispassionately about sex, a type of discourse that is second nature for cinematic men. These monologues confounded critics; are they sexual fantasies, warning signs of possession or madness, indications of Christine's healthy self-awareness, a dangerous sexual obsession, simple exhibitionism, a textual alienating strategy, or parodies of male-female relationships? Gordon, in replacing the new talkie's theoretical dialogue with pornographic recitation, asks us to consider a simpler answer: they are straightforward instances of the "variability of women's discourse," which should shock only those viewers who assume women's speech to be a simple, unchanging thing. Instead, as

38 Kay, "Incomplete Act," 85.

39 Ibid., 81.

40 Ibid.

Gordon argues, the men in her film cannot deal with sexually free and explicit women, and so those men ultimately withdraw from women: the more Christine speaks her sexuality, gaining the power of that speech, the more frozen Mark becomes.

The film's final sequence addresses the question of how viewers are meant to interpret Christine's textuality. First is a scene in which Christine threatens Louie on the phone; not cutting away to hear his side of the conversation, we only see and hear Christine, who speaks with a surprisingly fierce authority. Curiously, though, even as she blackmails Louie, it is clear she does not have a particular plan in mind: in response to what we assume is Louie's question "What do you want?" we hear Christine say only "I don't exactly know that right now, but I'll know when I see you." Next is a static shot of an empty street corner, the location of the meeting Christine had just arranged, over which are layered sounds of boat horns and John Lurie's jazzy noir score. It is hard to determine how this shot, lit only by a street lamp, relates to Christine's plan. Is this an image of the scene before the meeting will occur, or an image of its aftermath? Or perhaps viewers should read this shot unmoored from its indexicality as a "scene" of action, seeing it instead as representing a prevailing mood or emotion? Or perhaps it is simply an example of a "meaningless" avant-garde image? For as talkative as *Variety* is, the fact that this final shot is absent of language raises interpretive questions for viewers, most important of which is, is Christine finished with speech, or has she been silenced? And yet working alongside this kind of traditional question of narrative closure is the avant-garde tradition of the "meaningless image" that would refuse closure to Christine's narrative. Thus, two endings uncomfortably wrestle in this last moody shot: the solution to the mystery trajectory of Christine's investigation versus the avant-garde tradition that stubbornly pulls this shot outside of narrative into affect.

A New Kind of Satisfaction. Most mainstream reviewers were unable to engage with Gordon's theoretically informed play with narrative and textuality. A more obvious target for them was Gordon's decision to make a film about the consumption of pornography, a decision doubly surprising given both the political landscape at the time and the feminist underpinnings of her work. Since the surprise success with mainstream audiences of *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972), *The Devil in Miss Jones* (Gerard Damiano, 1973), and *Behind the Green Door* (Artie Mitchell and Jim Mitchell, 1972), interest in a so-called porno chic prepared audiences for more-mainstream films about pornography or with pornographic elements, such as *Hardcore* (Paul Schrader, 1979) and *Cruising* (William Friedkin, 1980).⁴¹ As a partial response, Bonnie Sherr Klein's 1982 documentary *Not a Love Story: A Film about Pornography* attacked the pornography industry directly, arguing that it eroticized images of violence against women. Klein's film, mentioned in more than one review of *Variety*, no doubt set some of the groundwork for how Gordon's film would be received. Unlike Friedkin and Schrader, who already had reputations for making violent, masculine films (the former had made *The French Connection* in 1971, and the latter wrote *Taxi Driver* [Martin Scorsese, 1976]), those familiar with Gordon's earlier feminist work would have thought her

41 Ralph Blumenthal, "Porno Chic," *New York Times*, January 21, 1973.

a very unlikely person to make a film about pornography. Amy Taubin summarizes the feeling: “Until *Variety*, Bette Gordon was a nice girl. She made the films she thought she was supposed to make.”⁴²

Alongside Gordon’s own filmmaking trajectory was the trajectory of feminism at the time, which split between anti-porn and pro-sex groups as anti-pornography feminists in the late 1970s and 1980s became more organized and powerful. The most successful of these groups, Women against Pornography, focused their efforts on Times Square, particularly the very theaters and sex shops where *Variety* was set. Among others, the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin helped theorize the group’s position in 1981’s *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*: “Pornography does not, as some claim, refute the idea that female sexuality is dirty: instead, pornography embodies and exploits this idea; pornography sells and promotes it.”⁴³ Thus, writers like Dworkin and groups like Women against Pornography were against pornography in any form, even proposing legislation that would make pornography a human rights violation, allowing women to sue pornographers for damages.⁴⁴ Opposed to this position were pro-sex feminists, notably lesbian S/M theorists like Gayle Rubin, who cofounded the feminist lesbian group Samois, which she described as “the first known public organization devoted to lesbian sadomasochism (S/M) and . . . a key player in the early phases of the feminist sex wars” with anti-pornography feminists.⁴⁵ Writers like Rubin and groups like Samois took exception to the anti-pornography feminists because their “attacks on pornography invariably included denunciations of S/M imagery and practice.”⁴⁶ The feminist sex wars that Rubin notes were precipitated by the 1982 Scholar & Feminist conference “Towards a Politics of Sexuality.” Held at Barnard College, the conference attracted an unprecedented amount of attention and controversy, including anti-pornography protesters passing out leaflets, defunding of the Scholar & Feminist series, and confiscation of the conference diary by Barnard College right before the conference.⁴⁷ The divide was acrimonious, and it was very public.

Bette Gordon was at the conference, leading a workshop with Kaja Silverman, “Pornography and the Construction of a Female Subject,” and in this context *Variety* was emblematic of the divide between the two opposed feminist positions. Because Gordon’s work neither followed mainstream feminist arguments against pornography nor advocated for a radical lesbian S/M position, it represented a problem for feminist viewers. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, even for viewers familiar with Gordon’s avant-garde work, the use of narrative and a move away from academic experimental

42 Amy Taubin, “As Long as She Pleases: Bette Gordon’s *Variety*,” *Village Voice*, May 15, 1984, 60.

43 Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Plume, 1989), 201.

44 See Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, eds., *In Harm’s Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 4.

45 Gayle Rubin, “Samois,” in *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered History in America*, ed. Marc Stein (Detroit: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2004), 3:67.

46 *Ibid.*, 68.

47 For a fuller account of the events surrounding the conference, see both Elizabeth Wilson, “The Context of ‘Between Pleasure and Danger’: The Barnard Conference on Sexuality,” *Feminist Review*, no. 13 (1983): 35–41, and the papers and talks from the conference reprinted in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

cinema pushed *Variety* even closer to the porno-chic position. Looking back at the notion of political correctness in feminist history, critic Jane Gaines identifies *Variety* as “a watershed example of the abandonment of countercinema and correctness in feminist film theory in favor of formally ‘incorrect’ (aesthetically excessive) classicism.”⁴⁸ As such, the film was also “mainstream feminist heresy” and thus “served as a rallying point for the 1982 Barnard conference participants.”⁴⁹

For Gordon, the central challenge was, as one reviewer put it, how to “show porn graphically without participating in the exploitation of women as sex objects.”⁵⁰ This kind of balance would have frustrated feminists looking for a didactic film with a clearer social or political purpose. Yet Gordon was less interested in the social effects of pornography on viewers than in the technical question of how pornography works. For example, in an interview with Coco Fusco, she attributes her work to an “interest in cinema as a kind of object that requires the viewer to take pleasure in looking at it,” rather than from the more binary “social interaction” of women who are only either pro- or anti-pornography.⁵¹ Here and elsewhere, Gordon argues that pornography *is* cinema: “I only became interested in pornography because it was such an extreme example of the way all cinema works.”⁵² Thus, the pornography of *Variety* just offers “extreme examples of mainstream Hollywood cinema. Both employ the voyeuristic mode to exploit women as objects of male fantasy and male desire.”⁵³ In the same interview, Gordon describes conceiving of *Variety* as being “based on the structure of a porn film,” which is to say a structure that perpetually creates a sense of desire but never offers fulfillment.⁵⁴ David Edelstein put it more bluntly in the *Village Voice*: “There should be a sign on the box office window that says, BE ADVISED: THIS MOVIE HAS NO ENDING. Gordon wants us all pent-up as we leave—unsatisfied, deprived of our orgasm.”⁵⁵

As made clear by that last quotation, Gordon’s use of pornography was as provocative to mainstream film critics as it was to academic feminists. While Jay Carr in the *Boston Globe* saw “an amusing juxtaposition of screened porn and iced fish,” most other newspaper reviewers expressed disappointment, such as Archer Winsten in the *New York Post*, who complained that “there are no explicit sex scenes on the screen,” or Kathleen Carroll in the *Daily News* who offered the staid cliché that, despite the

48 Jane Gaines, “Feminist Heterosexuality and Its Politically Incorrect Pleasures,” *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (1995): 401.

49 Ibid.

50 Joseph Gelmis, “Review of *Variety*, Horizon Films,” *Newsday*, March 8, 1985, sec. 3, 11.

51 Fusco, “*Variety*,” 61.

52 Bette Gordon and Karyn Kay, “Look Back / Talk Back,” in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (London: BFI Publishing, 1993), 92. She makes the same argument in her interviews with Fusco, “*Variety*,” 61, and Yann Lardeau, “Du côté de la pornographie: Entretien avec Bette Gordon,” *Le journal des cahiers du cinéma* 49 (1985): vii: “Pornography, this is what it means when I go to the cinema” (“la pornographie, c’est ça que ça veut dire quand je vais au cinéma”).

53 Bette Gordon, “Variety: The Pleasure in Looking,” in Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*, 197.

54 Fusco, “*Variety*,” 64.

55 Edelstein, “Review of *Variety*,” 55.

pornographic subject, “this movie is about as exciting to watch as dripping paint.”⁵⁶ Even when the film was rereleased in 1999, reviewers still felt the need to warn buyers who might be fooled by the provocative box cover that the film is actually “more of a critique of pornography than an attempt to titillate” or that it is “one long tease with nothing cathartic to offer Christine or its audience” (Figure 4).⁵⁷ Other contemporary reviews were able to see better how Gordon’s pornographic structure undermined traditional narrative. For example, commenting on the unresolved final shot, Linda Dubler saw “a sort of cinematic coitus interruptus, denying the viewer the quasi-sexual satisfaction of resolution and narrative closure.”⁵⁸ Likewise, Steve Jenkins read Christine’s growing fascination with pornography as a “parody of the spectator’s insatiable desire for narratives which repeat, with variations, familiar pleasures.”⁵⁹ Both critics thus find *Variety*’s unfulfilling conclusion an interesting success because it denies viewers a promised pleasure. Thus, whether reviewers were complaining that *Variety* was not pornographic enough or were demonstrating that its very structure was pornographic, we see how the film was primarily received in the context of mid-1980s pornography.

In her groundbreaking study *Hard Core*, Linda Williams describes an important narrative change in pornography in the early 1970s as it shifted from emphasizing “meat” to “money” shots: unlike the earlier “stag films,” “in feature-length ‘pornos,’ [the sexual] numbers tend to be complete dramas of arousal, excitement, climax, and (usually) satisfaction.”⁶⁰ Williams finds one example of a porno film that fails to end in a satisfied climax, which for that reason has “the most utopian of all possible hard-core endings,” with star Marilyn Chambers calling out for “more, more, more.”⁶¹ Appropriately enough, the film is titled *Insatiable* (Stu Segall, 1980). Williams sees this film’s ending as utopian because, rather than connecting satisfaction with sexual climax, it proposes “a new kind of satisfaction: climax’s infinite

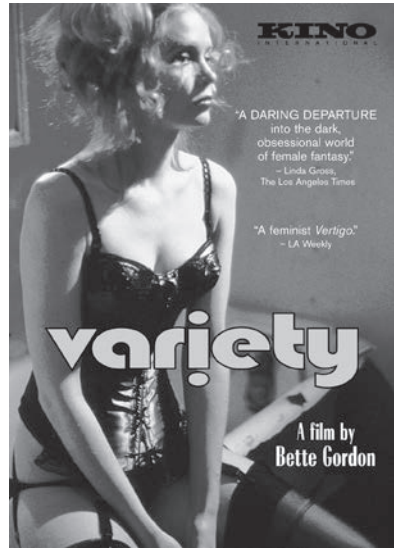


Figure 4. Kino’s cover art for *Variety*’s rerelease misleadingly emphasizes Christine’s sexualized appearance (Courtesy Kino Lorber).

56 Jay Carr, “Flirting with Porn,” *Boston Globe*, March 30, 1984, Arts/Films, 1; Archer Winsten, “Review of *Variety*, Horizon Films,” *New York Post*, March 8, 1985, 48; Kathleen Carroll, “*Variety* Is Not the Spice of Life,” *Daily News*, March 8, 1985, 5.

57 Lee Parpart, “*Variety* Revisited: A Seriously Sexy Feminist Film,” *Globe and Mail*, July 3, 1999, 67; Tim Lucas, “Review of *Variety*, Horizon Films,” *Video Watchdog*, no. 51 (1999): 25.

58 Dubler, “Review of *Variety*,” 28.

59 Jenkins, “Review of *Variety*,” 138.

60 Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 72.

61 *Ibid.*, 179.

prolongation.”⁶² In one of the most perceptive contemporary reviews of *Variety*, Amy Taubin also connects Gordon’s artistic practice with a similar “new kind of satisfaction,” suggesting that *Variety* is metaphoric of Gordon’s own developing authority as a filmmaker, through which she was able “to discover her own pleasure in film rather than dutifully following the, as often as not, exhausted pleasure of others.”⁶³ The title of Taubin’s review, “As Long as She Pleases,” captures the same new pleasure that Williams saw on Marilyn Chambers’s face.

An emphasis on the lack of pornographic release in *Variety*, and the failure of reviewers to consider the erotics of the pornographic scene rather than just money shots, is apparent in another trend that emerges in many reviews: pornography is implicitly defined as primarily, if not wholly, a visual experience. For example, Joseph Gelmis, in a generally positive review, argues that “*Variety* treats porn as a state of mind. We don’t see pornographic images. We see the effect they have on a woman who becomes obsessed by them. There is, in other words, a dirty movie unreeling in the head of the heroine, but we see only her reactions to it.”⁶⁴ This argument needs both to treat pornography as nonverbal and to diminish the potency of Christine’s spoken porn recitations. A number of other reviewers also discuss the oohs and aahs of the pornographic soundtrack, associating the sound of porn with nonlinguistic animal sighs and moans: Dan Walworth sees “a body much closer to a corpse, a fragmented body—XXX moans filter into the lobby of the theater . . . descriptions of sexual relations without any image whatsoever,” and Christian Viviani finds “porno (heard, but not seen, which is the trick).”⁶⁵ Clearly, the soundtrack of pornography unaccompanied by sexual imagery is discomfiting because it prevents viewers from fully understanding (and participating in) a complete trajectory of sexual pleasure.

From this perspective, *Variety* might indeed be a bad porn film. But if we take seriously Kaja Silverman’s argument in *The Acoustic Mirror* that “Gordon [has] experimented boldly with the female voice-off and voice-over, jettisoning synchronization, symmetry, and simultaneity in favor of dissonance and dislocation,” then we might see connections between *Variety*’s aural pornographic stance and the increased presence of speech and writing discussed earlier.⁶⁶ Along with others, Kay Armatage has argued that Christine’s “voice has been excised entirely from the film,” particularly since she is not allowed the generic voice-over during the film noir portion of the film, as her space is “invaded by the voices of others” (e.g., the porn theater soundtrack, her oppressive answering machine), and even her own voice during the pornographic recitations “is performed as if possessed.”⁶⁷ Although it might be contradictory to claim that *Variety* both is about female language and excises the female voice, Silver-

62 Ibid.

63 Taubin, “As Long as She Pleases,” 60.

64 Gelmis, “Review of *Variety*,” 11.

65 My translation of “Il y a du porno (entendu, mais non vu, c’est là l’astuce),” from Christian Viviani, “Review of *Variety*, Horizon Films,” *Positif* 281–282 (1984): 102.

66 Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 165.

67 Kay Armatage, “The Seven Sins of Bette Gordon’s *Variety*,” *Cineaction*, no. 5 (1986): 11.

man would encourage us to see this as an experimental provocation to audiences to understand Christine’s voice as proof of her subjecthood, which is constantly threatened to be turned into objecthood by classical cinema’s narrative conventions. This is the argument Maggie Humm makes in claiming that *Variety* “shows how the voice has a particular stake in the reconstitution of [a] more diverse female sexuality.”⁶⁸ This extends a common attitude about pornography (and sexuality generally): what is hidden is as important as what is seen. As Silverman hints, Gordon uses the pornographic cinema soundtrack in this manner, offering us with only a few exceptions a disembodied voice or a voice speaking in opposition to the image we see on screen. Gordon phrases this succinctly: “I am a voyeur with sound.”⁶⁹ This seeming paradox encapsulates Gordon’s “new kind of satisfaction,” troubling viewers’ simple embrace or rejection of Christine’s burgeoning porno sexuality.

“Don’t Worry about Meaning.” Since her death in 1997, Kathy Acker’s papers have been held in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University. In addition to scores of notebooks, correspondence, and novel drafts, the collection holds sixty-six pages of double-spaced, typewritten material for *Variety* with notes and corrections in Acker’s hand. Of particular note are two undated documents: one of forty-seven pages titled “Kathy’s Changes to Film,” which outlines thirty-two scenes with filming directions, and one of nineteen pages titled “Additions to Dialogue for *Variety*,” which is mainly restricted to dialogue changes (Figure 5). Neither document is written in standard studio format for screenplays (i.e., single spaced, with centered dialogue, capitalized names, and markers like “EXT. THEATER—NIGHT”). Both are keyed to Gordon’s separate working script, and so each section is prefaced with markers like “p. 3, scene 4.” The similarity of paper, typewriter settings, and pen used for annotations suggests that the two were composed in the same time frame and submitted together, although “Additions” is clearly a later partial revision to some scenes in “Kathy’s Changes.” As to be expected, there are numerous typographical errors, which I reproduce as they appear.

Comparing these documents to the finished film allows us not only to see how much of Acker’s spoken and

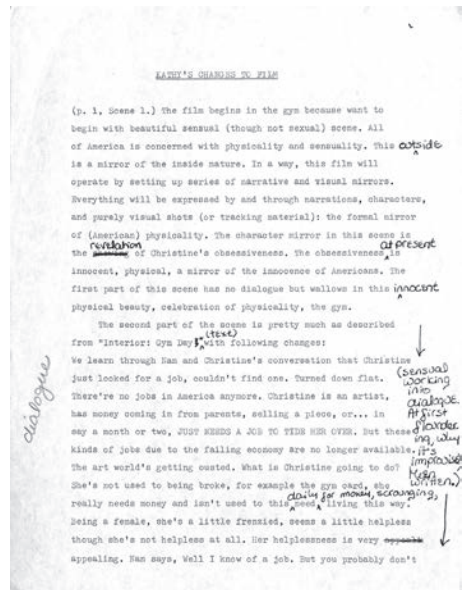


Figure 5. The first page of Acker’s typescript for *Variety* (Courtesy Kathy Acker estate).

68 Maggie Humm, *Feminism and Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 53.

69 My translation of “Moi, je suis voyeur avec le son” from Lardeau, “Du côté de la pornographie,” vii.

visual aspects were used but also to analyze the aside moments in which Acker editorializes, philosophizes, or suggests a particular directorial choice to Gordon. So, because the major plotting of the film was already established by Gordon's working script, we should read Acker's text as intended mainly to amplify, clarify, or shape the direction of Gordon's film rather than initiate it or counteract an earlier version. First, the majority of the thirty-two scenes that Acker describes do appear in the finished film and more or less in the order she describes them: we open with a scene in a gym that sets up Christine taking her new job, there are the repeated porn recitations to Mark, the pursuit of Louie across New York City and to New Jersey, and the concluding phone call. Three scenes were not used, although two of them likely because they were redundant with other similar scenes: a sex scene between Mark and Christine (discussed later), an additional (second) date between Louie and Christine, and an additional (fourth) scene in which Christine recites porn to Mark.

But second, despite the similarities between Acker's notes and the final film, there are a number of places where Acker's specific suggestions do not appear in the final film. Unlike a line of dialogue or a stage direction, Acker's textual commentary to Gordon is the hardest to quantify in terms of comparing to the finished film, but that commentary is the most revealing of the differences between the visions of Acker and Gordon. This is most noticeable in Acker's conceptualization of Christine's character, as in one place where Acker describes a wild sex scene between Mark and Christine, with Christine acting "almost like every man's dream in a porn film."⁷⁰ In Acker's notes, Christine is far more explicitly proactive about sex than she ever is in the film:

She's writihing she's screaming she wants extasy. She bites herself. She holds her own wrists down. Fucking doesn't matter. Where's she going to find it. Mark doesn't even exist because he can't. She's beyond being junked drunk she will do anything, at least get on to the street,

Christine: I have to get on the street.

to look, go crazy, find find find. Put on clothes. Any clothes.

Shot of Fulton Fish market headline while she's wandering street.⁷¹

This sort of ecstatic, out-of-control, reasonless prose is typical for Acker; compare, for example, a similar scene from her earlier novel *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*: "Sometimes I go crazy I go pick up a man. 'Do you want to fuck?' we go off fuck in every way possible until he can no longer stand the passion, I never see him again."⁷² As with her novels, the sexuality that Acker gives Christine in her script is wild, "crazy," and not often long lasting. Interested much more in emotion than reason, sexuality offers for Acker the possibility of a realm of pure experience outside of rational language.

70 Acker, "Kathy's Changes," 22–23.

71 *Ibid.*, 23.

72 Kathy Acker, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*, in *Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 61.

It made sense for Gordon to cut this scene for a few reasons: it focuses on Mark's inner life in a way that is out of place for the rest of the film, it defines Christine's sexual activity much more sharply than anywhere else, and it presents a heightened emotional state well outside of the tightly controlled minimalist range established elsewhere. Thus, this scene is one clue that Gordon and Acker were pursuing different visions for the same character. For Acker, this scene is a key step in Christine's transforming awareness of desire, which involved an active sexual pursuit. But as shown already, Gordon wanted to emphasize the voyeurism of sexuality rather than the flesh of physical contact. In fact, "desire" is one of the primary key terms of Acker's *Variety*, appearing twenty-two times. Some examples:

"We start with Christine. . . . Because it's herself her desires which are awakening."⁷³

"As all desire must happen at NIGHT because NIGHT hides our fears."⁷⁴

"Every step forward in desire, remember, needs two backward and around steps."⁷⁵

"Reality or appearances are a mirror of desire. Desire involves collusion."⁷⁶

"This is desire: following after, the play of presence and absence."⁷⁷

"This language is desire not communication unless you too are (as are the audience ((we hope)) in the world of desire."⁷⁸

"Christine moves as straight ahead toward her goal, desire, as the train."⁷⁹

"This will is what is not but will be, is looking, thus the nature of desire."⁸⁰

As even this incomplete list shows, Acker wanted to define Christine by employing a nonstandard, philosophical definition of desire. This is clear from the first mention of desire cited above, a tricky sentence to parse: "Because it's herself her desires which are awakening." This desire might sit alongside a conventional sexual desire, but it also represents a radically more transformative animating spirit that propels Christine's awakening of her own inner self. Rather than the traditional desire for some object, Acker imagines desire as a world that characters exist in, shaping their experience and driving them toward new, transformative behaviors. But since it relies on linguistic repetition, the repeated use of the word "desire" in a nontraditional sense was an extremely difficult concept for Gordon to reproduce in narrative film. In this,

73 Acker, "Kathy's Changes," 6.

74 *Ibid.*, 11.

75 *Ibid.*, 18.

76 *Ibid.*, 18a.

77 *Ibid.*, 19.

78 *Ibid.*, 21.

79 *Ibid.*, 27.

80 *Ibid.*, 43.

Acker's conceptual philosophy reveals yet another reason she was both a perfect figure to collaborate with Gordon and why *Variety's* avant-garde narrative strategies would have been particularly difficult for viewers to grasp: both understood female desire as a complex, evolving process, but Gordon's challenge was to work within a narrative structure that would have precluded the kind of extreme linguistic experimentation Acker suggested.

As wild as it is, Mark and Christine's sex scene was not the most pornographic one Acker proposed. She describes many other images that would have been absolutely unfilmable, for example, the visuals she wrote for the imagined Christine and Louie porno film:

Louie's cock is sized ten feet by two feet diameter.

Christine: Who are you?

Shot of fingernails clawing into flesh. Shot of hairs clinging to because wet skin. Shot of the tip of a cock with a drop of sperm coming out. Shot of the edge between pussy and left heavy thigh.

Shot of inner upper thigh that's covered with sperm that's slightly pink-tinged (bloody.)

Louie: I'm what you want.

Huge shot of a cock one inch from a huge cunt.⁸¹

To film images as explicit as these would have ruined any possibility that *Variety* be seen more widely. At this scene in the film, Gordon instead intercuts between a number of different shots, some with Louie and Christine and some from real pornographic films featuring noticeably different actors. Combined with a rhythmic series of Christine's reaction shots, the effect is that viewers understand that Christine is only fantasizing herself into preexisting pornographic films that she has seen rather than having a real sexual encounter with Louie. Thus, even setting aside the pornographic visuals, the final scene appears to be quite at odds with Acker's original concept. Notice how her description of the beginning of this scene repeatedly demands the "real" rather than the fantasy that Gordon edited together:

Cut to:

Christine's head is directly on screen, not Louie. Unlike all the black and white and grays in this scene (the dark movie room) which have grown less and less visible, spare glimpses of light, this "film" is real day, real. It is Christine and Louie. It must be real between them. They're in the real hotel.⁸²

In a number of other places we see Acker similarly preoccupied with emphasizing "reality" over a filmic fantasy. In her scene descriptions, Acker often offers explanatory

81 Ibid., 34–35.

82 Ibid., 33.

asides to show what she means by “real.” For example, in describing Mark and Christine at the beginning of the film, she defines Christine’s innocence by the normalcy of her sexual relationship with Mark: “[R]eal sex on the other hand is that which transforms. In this (true) sense Mark and her relation is pornographic. This is bourgeois sex.”⁸³ From this perspective, rather than enter into a new, strange world of pornography, Acker sees Christine’s sexual life as already pornographic, which means unreal, expected, bourgeois, normal, nontransformative. Whereas Gordon’s film emphasizes the importance for her character of discovering a world of pornography, Acker sees pornography not as the key to a new identity for Christine but as the locked door standing in the way.

Overall, Acker’s version of *Variety* attempts to encourage viewers to identify with Christine, but in doing so Acker again runs into the problem of how to integrate the narrative and avant-garde aspects of her subject. Following the repetitive logic of pornography, Acker uses repetitions and mirrors as a structuring device, which she stresses from the first paragraph of her script notes: “In a way, this film will operate by setting up series of narrative and visual mirrors. Everything will be expressed by and through narrations, characters, and purely visual shots (or tracking material): the formal mirror of (American) physicality.”⁸⁴ Some of these mirrors in the film are literal, for example, the opening locker room conversation is staged so that Christine is shot reflected through a mirror; Christine’s booth at work has a prominent mirror, and a key scene near the end has Christine framed so that she appears reflected in two mirrors (Figures 6–8). Acker also imagined a series of visually repetitive scenes as being like thematic mirrors, such as Christine in her booth selling tickets, her coffee shop conversations with Mark, her following Louie, and her listening to her answering machine messages (the same callers always calling in the same order). Acker even labeled the phone messages as “first mirror,” “second mirror,” and so on, and saw them as “the first in all sorts of senses mirror we have of Christine from the inside.”⁸⁵

In addition to the straightforward mirror, Acker also suggests more complex effects to encourage identification with Christine. Early on, she justifies a scene with Mark by writing “the only reason we see a bit of his character now is



Figure 6. Christine (Sandy McLeod) framed in a mirror while her friend Nan (Nan Goldin) tells her about a job opportunity selling tickets at a pornographic theater in *Variety* (Horizon Films, 1983).

83 Ibid., 5.

84 Ibid., 1.

85 Ibid., 12. Ironically, the critic Susan Jhirad took this as the problem of the film, complaining that “in the end, the only sexuality in the film is essentially narcissism,” in “Review of *Variety*, Horizon Films,” *Cinéaste* 14, no. 1 (1985): 45.



Figure 7. Christine (Sandy McLeod) framed in a mirror while she sells Louie (Richard Davidson) a ticket in *Variety* (Horizon Films, 1983).



Figure 8. Christine (Sandy McLeod) framed in a mirror while provocatively dressed up in *Variety* (Horizon Films, 1983).

that we the audience haven't yet totally identified with Christine: we as well as her aren't yet obsessed."⁸⁶ In her staging of the scene where Christine listens to her phone messages, Acker imagines an aural effect by which, as the messages are replayed, audiences begin gradually to hear "the call more clearly because we like Christine are more interested."⁸⁷ In a later scene, an expressionless Christine is watching pornography alone in a booth "because she doesn't know what to feel/think because the audience doesn't know what to feel/think."⁸⁸ A scene at the Fulton Fish Market "is seen through

eyes. Which means that shots are framed. Sometimes circles around them. All sorts of frames."⁸⁹ In a later scene, "we don't need to see Christine because Christine and our eyes are the same eyes. So this action is very romantic because our eyes are obsessed."⁹⁰ There are even more literal identifications: by scene 10, "from now on the part of the film that's about her is visually defined by her obsessed perception."⁹¹ When Christine pursues Louie, Acker suggests doing "an Alfred Hitchcock" "because this is through Christine's eyes and she's seeing in movie genres," and "the train's moving because Christine's moving."⁹² She asks for "jangled visuals and dialogue because Christine's jangled."⁹³ Later, when Christine is in the bar, "the center is around her because even

86 Acker, "Kathy's Changes," 7.

87 *Ibid.*, 13.

88 *Ibid.*, 26.

89 *Ibid.*, 20.

90 *Ibid.*, 31.

91 *Ibid.*, 18.

92 *Ibid.*, 27.

93 *Ibid.*, 18.

documentary now is through her obsession.”⁹⁴ By scene 14, “the audience has totally identified with Christine,” and so for the last half of her text, Acker imagines a different cinema of possibilities, representing a subjective interiority at one with the audience, where the audience identifies with Christine so much that Christine also becomes a viewer of the movie she is in.⁹⁵ In other words, Christine does not even need to be present in some “documentary” scenes, because the audience has identified so much with her that it has called her into its midst in a kind of reverse projection.

This is an author’s idea, something much easier to do in prose than in film, and shows how difficult it was for Acker to imagine a film version of the kind of literary characters she had developed. For example, a few pages later she even mistakenly inserts herself into the film when she attributes a key voice-over monologue to “(my) the narrator’s voice” before correcting herself and parenthetically adding Christine’s name in ink.⁹⁶ This indicates how important it was to her writing process for Acker to imagine herself as Christine, particularly since this occurs at the crucial scene for Acker, “THE PLACE IN THE FILM YOU AND I BETTE STATE WHERE WE’RE AT AND THE FILM CAN’T JUST BE COMMERCIAL.”⁹⁷ Identifying with the narrator in this speech, Acker likewise wants audience members to embody Christine’s porno apotheosis toward pure will: “So I am hollow. I’m not a person. I am my will.”⁹⁸ In this sense, Acker attempts to support the film’s larger strategy of bridging avant-garde and narrative cinema, but I question how successful she could have been, given the medium. For instance, in discussing the presentation of pornography, Acker urges Gordon to “allow the film to retain its ambiguity which is what real sex or living is: all interpretations, allowances are allowed.”⁹⁹ While ambiguity may be a central effect of the avant-garde, in terms of attitudes toward sexual representation a didactic argument about the “real” nature of sex and life is not in the purview of film technique, but rather an effect of the narrative film’s ability to transform its spectator. Similarly, throughout her notes Acker pushes for a linguistic, anti-rational cinema of emotions that is female centered and independent of meaning: “Don’t worry about meaning. This isn’t goal-oriented, it’s female.”¹⁰⁰ “Don’t worry about meaning. Language isn’t about meaning, but intention (Wittgenstein).”¹⁰¹ “It shouldn’t make all that much sense. It’s just what we understand.”¹⁰² “There doesn’t need to be any rationality (narrative reason), there’s only need. Need formally governs the narrative.”¹⁰³ These instructions are not just to describe the visual montage sequences Acker had in mind, but also the barroom scenes of dialogue. Thus, Acker attempts to align her linguistic avant-garde practice with a

94 *Ibid.*, 37.

95 *Ibid.*, 18a.

96 *Ibid.*, 42.

97 *Ibid.*

98 *Ibid.*

99 *Ibid.*, 26.

100 *Ibid.*, 8.

101 *Ibid.*, 12.

102 *Ibid.*, 13.

103 *Ibid.*, 24.

narrative cinema framework, although the fact that she continually urges Gordon not to “worry” about this suggests she knew how much it would be a challenging task.

Gordon remembers Acker visiting the set: “She said it was all perfect! Exactly how she had imagined it would be.”¹⁰⁴ But how closely was Gordon able to follow Acker’s advice? In her notes for the last scene (actually the penultimate scene before the final empty shot), Acker inserts a friendly threat: “P.S. If you cut a word out of the speech in the last scene I slice off your head. If I do say so myself, I like it.”¹⁰⁵ This scene, at almost four typescript pages, is by far the longest one Acker wrote, but very little of it made it into final film: only four or five snatches of dialogue. While the general gist of the final phone conversation between Christine and Louie is preserved, clearly the specific dialogue choices that Acker made were considered dispensable. Acker had written more generic thriller dialogue than appears in the film, such as references to a murder, the Genovese crime family, and a secret bank account, so it might have been simply that Gordon wanted to retain more ambiguity around Louie’s supposed crime. Or, given the difficulty of writing only one side of a telephone conversation, it may have been that Acker’s dialogue was too stilted: “My name is Christine. I believe you know me. (Pause.) You do know me. Shall I refresh your memory. (pause).”¹⁰⁶ Looking at Gordon’s script, the first part of the dialogue Christine speaks is similar, but where Acker has Christine hesitate, waste time, and worry about getting caught, Gordon is more concise, parenthetically noting that “this is a big moment—she’s absolutely direct—knows what she wants—to confront.”

But the most telling creative difference between Acker and Gordon is found in the last line of dialogue Acker wrote, meant to be spoken by Christine over the final shot of the empty street corner: “Now it’s time for me to go travelling,” referencing an earlier line of reflective dialogue Christine spoke into the mirror: “I should dye my hair white and go travelling.”¹⁰⁷ In a deviation from Acker’s notes, the film’s last line of dialogue is Christine saying “You meet me there” on the phone to Louie, and there is no voice-over during the last shot of the empty street. By omitting the last voice-over line about traveling, the film is better able to achieve a balance between narrative and avant-garde, but it also undermines the framework Acker established of viewers identifying with Christine in her journey to experience the larger physical world around her. Gordon tells me the ending is “stolen from Antonioni, from *L’Eclisse* [1962],” and feels that although it contradicts Acker’s specific notes for *Variety*, it actually more closely captures the spirit of ambiguity that Acker had asked for: as with Antonioni, the problem with *Variety* was not that women could have sexuality but that the film refused a simple conclusion to the question of female desire. Thus, the final scene was the crucial moment of ambiguity that kept *Variety* from tipping into traditional narrative’s containment of the female image, and while Acker wanted to give it to Christine’s voice-over, Gordon instead gave the scene to urban emptiness. Whereas Acker might

104 Forson, “Interview with Bette Gordon.”

105 Acker, “Kathy’s Changes,” 43.

106 *Ibid.*, 45.

107 *Ibid.*, 46, 44.

have meant to make Christine a hero of her own story, Gordon refused the question of female power all together.

I suggested earlier that there is a hidden conflict within Acker and Gordon's collaboration: on the one hand, their shared interests and cultural perspective made them a perfect match, but on the other hand, they were coming to work with narrative in very contradictory ways. But actually, in studying the historical context of *Variety's* production—as part of the feminist porn wars, speaking back against narrative's connection to gender, transitioning from the avant-garde—I can see that despite the numerous points of difference between Acker's and Gordon's visions for *Variety*, ultimately the film was only enriched because of the unique collaborative spirit of the time. Gordon, who had next hoped to make a motorcycle road movie with Acker, described her to me as the kind of artist that “opens up work for other people.”¹⁰⁸ In this light, rather than see Gordon as simply rejecting or accepting Acker's notes on the script, we should see *Variety* as a collaboration between a diverse number of ideas and people at a time when independent filmmaking allowed for experimentation and risk. Acker was crucial to this opening up of artistic possibility.

Ironically, given her own literary project, Acker tried to be more narratively “movie-like” in her script notes, and so it is only in studying these notes and the film's context of reception that we are able to understand how Acker's collaboration on *Variety* had as much to do with her artistic persona as it did with her actual writing. By not giving Christine the final, privileged disembodied voice-over line, it is clear that Gordon ultimately pursued a different vision for Christine than the one laid out by Acker. But this decision captures the impossibility of simply trying to reconcile Acker's and Gordon's approaches: Acker's *Variety*, trapped in the avant-garde between pornography and narrative, exemplifies all the entwined problems of the film's production, tangled in feminist approaches to pornography, narrative in an avant-garde tradition, and the role of speech and writing in film. Gordon's *Variety*, conversely, tried to present narrative in a new way that directly challenged issues of genre and reception, risking making a film that could be both narrative and avant-garde, both feminist and pornographic. *

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108 Bette Gordon, interview by Kevin L. Ferguson, November 12, 2014.