

Jasmina Šepetavc

## QUEER AND FEMINIST FUTURES: THE IMPORTANCE OF A FUTURE AND MOBILISING FEMINIST FILM IN POST TIMES

### ABSTRACT

*This article is concerned with alternative notions of temporality, specifically with alternative imaginings of the future that are important now more than ever. We try to deconstruct the politics of teleologically ordained linear temporalities which can function – if not questioned – as some sort of repetition without any real difference, through conceptualizing time ruptures and intervals, which would open up important ways of thinking about potentialities of the new. We attempt to think about time and the future through queer and Deleuzian feminist film theory, specifically the feminist film *Born in Flames*. We argue that cinema affects us, opens us up to thinking about potentialities of the new, futurity and new ways of connecting (new forms of communities), and therefore holds crucial transformative potential.*

KEY WORDS: *queer temporality, feminism, cinema, affect, interval, Born in Flames*

### Queerovske in feministične prihodnosti: Pomembnost prihodnosti in mobilizirajočega feminističnega filma v post-časih

#### IZVLEČEK

V članku se ukvarjamo z alternativnimi pojmi temporalnosti, še posebej z alternativnimi idejami prihodnosti. Politiko teleološko določenih linearnih temporalnosti, ki lahko delujejo kot nekakšna ponavljanja brez prave razlike, poskušamo dekonstruirati skozi konceptualizacijo časovnih razkolov in intervalov, ki odpirajo pomembne načine razmišljanja o potencialnostih novega. O času in prihodnosti poskušamo misliti skozi queerovsko in (deleuzovsko) feministično filmsko teorijo ter feministični film *Born in Flames*. Trdimo, da nas film afektira, nas odpre za razmišljanje o potencialnostih novega, prihodnosti in novih načinov povezovanja (novih oblik skupnosti) in ima zato ključni transformativni potencial.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: *queerovska temporalnost, feminizem, film, afekt, interval, Born in Flames*

## 1 Introduction

In her 1984 essay *Notes towards a politics of location*, Adrienne Rich famously explained what she means when talking about the necessity to locate oneself, not through *the body*, but *a body*, "my body" of every writer that "plunges" the one who thinks, who writes, who observes "[...] into lived experience, particularity: I see scars, disfigurements, discolorations, damages, losses, as well as what pleases me" (Rich 1994: 215). However, a location should not be seen as a halt, a territorialisation of thought and bodies or even a paradigmatic grounding of a "Woman", but as a point of movement; for, as Rich writes: "These notes are the marks of a struggle to keep moving ..." (*ibid*: 211). The *Notes* were written a year after the film *Born in Flames* (1983, director Lizzie Borden), which will be analyzed in this article. However, both works speak of the double necessity for feminist thought, politics and action: on the one hand, the necessity to ground oneself, to be accountable for one's location, one's present tasks and problems, and, on the other, of the necessity "to keep moving", to intervene, to transform, to think differently. This is the same double bind of feminism – very much concerned with confronting the now and thinking the new, the future – Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe in their take on women's movements, the double bind of confronting the rigid molar system of segments on the one hand, but also of not stopping there and rather imagining new ways of connecting and a more flexible molecular feminist politics on the other:

*It is, of course, indispensable for women to conduct a molar politics, with a view to winning back their own organism, their own history, their own subjectivity: "we as women ..." makes its appearance as a subject of enunciation. But it is dangerous to confine oneself to such a subject, which does not function without drying up a spring or stopping a flow* (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 276).

Therefore, a feminist epistemology of owning up to one's own location starts with the notion of the subject, a lived body and experience, but goes also beyond subjectivity, thought constantly moving, transforming into something else entirely. How else could we explain that an everyday act of watching a film could be a catalyst or an intensive push for thought and a visceral push towards transformation, an affective touch through time and history (Dinshaw 1999) and a opening up of potentialities for the future?

The feminist politics of location then demands a short contextualization, the here and now of this piece of writing. This article has been written in the passing last days of the year 2016, a year especially potent for humanist thought that thrust into the popular vocabulary concepts such as *postfact* or *posttruth*, trends with uncertain political consequences to be manifested over the next years. The prefix *post-*, causes and consequences of both concepts go hand in hand with another *post-* concept, *postfeminist*, which in this case implies an era *after*, after the women's rights movements, after we have secured equal rights, after feminist politics. A temporal halt. In this era, feminist or, for that matter, lesbian political concerns connote a sort of an anachronism, a boring relic of times past or a "temporal drag" (Freeman 2010). To localize and concretize even more: over the last few weeks of the *postfeminist* year of 2016, at the same time when Polish women painted their streets black in protest, the Slovenian Catholic Church projected a film in Ljubljana's main city

square. The film was a mix of ultrasound imagery and computer animation, showing a trajectory of a foetus development, all the while posing "philosophical" and political questions like: "When does life begin? Is this a baby or a foetus? What should I do?" So, one day, I stopped and watched the film on my stroll across the city, getting a distinct sense of being caught in a prison; not a spatial one that one I could escape, a temporal one. It is not my intention to talk about control societies and endoscopic imagery mapping our bodies, nor do I want to talk about abortion. What I do want to highlight, is this sense of temporal imprisonment, a sense of a return of the same, which indefinitely postpones (revolutionary) change, for some more than for the others. A temporal halt, perhaps even a return, best described by the now famous protest slogan: "I cannot believe I am still protesting this shit". Our task here is to talk about potential futurities from a feminist and a queer perspective, without succumbing to notions of linear progressive temporality. The catalyst of thought with which we try to think time, the future and becoming is cinema.

I always turn to movies in anxiety, in my time of need for what can be called an affective feminist and queer community, connected not only through location (a place), but also through time and queer history. To position, in the post- world, something as a political film, even a feminist film, is a hard task, which is not always productive. What I mean by "not always productive" is invoked by Chantal Akerman's refusal of the label "feminist" or director Sally Potter's description of how, for viewers, feminism: "[...] has become a trigger word that stops people's thinking. You literally see people's eyes glaze over with exhaustion when the word flashes into the conversation" (Frilot 1993). The problem becomes even more complicated when dealing with the intersectionality of identities or the refusal of identities, the multiplicity of desires and theoretical contradictions between feminist and lesbian film criticism, between queer and lesbian theory etc. However, at the same time, feminist theory's important emphasis would be that it is crucial to position oneself and work on from there, towards something more open and transformative than what we would call a fixed identity or molar subjectivity.

Therefore, let me begin with New Queer Cinema to schematically describe what I mean when I talk about time prisons and the need to think about alternative notions of temporalities, ones that would rupture this recurring time frame and would open up ways to think about potentialities of the new. To think about cinema as a form that opens up thought and the body, thought which is, in this case, connected to a specific problem of thinking alternative temporalities of feminist and queer futurities, I go a bit further back in time, to the 1983 feminist sci-fi *Born in Flames*. Even though a move to return to the past for politically inspirational thought on potentially sustainable futurity seems like a paradox or even a non-constructive nostalgia for times lost and movements tamed, the chosen film example is not only an unbelievably accurate portrayal of the present, but also important as a opening point into issues of temporality, political cinema and imagining new feminist communities and futurities. Lastly, it is always important to engage with film, to write about a film that stirs up something within you or even beyond you, provokes senses and thought, begins what could be called a process of becoming. In this sense, I am guided by the Deleuzian emphasis on what cinema does, rather than older feminist film theory's mantra concerned with what the filmic text means.

## 2 Temporal bifurcations and time of cinema

Let us then take the notions of what we will at this point rather schematically call normative and queer temporalities. To think of the temporality of the normative is to ask: How do temporal regimes inscribe themselves to the body? How are they inscribed in the power/knowledge nexus? How did calendars, switches of the seasonal clock, time of work and leisure transform from institutional time to the time and rhythms of the body and biological need? To follow Elisabeth Freeman: "time is not only of the essence; it actually produces essences – well-rested bodies, controlled orgasms" (2007: 160). It is also a sort of a teleological time connected to what Lee Edelman called "reproductive futurism", a "vitalizing fantasy" that promises to bridge (through a child) the time gap between us and the future, and bring redemption. It is from this notion of transference that heterosexuality gets its inscriptions of meaningful encounters that obscure the drives, while queer is inscribed with quite the opposite, being a matrix connected with useless relationality and sexuality, connected to a whole other set of transmissions: those of death and the end of the future. Edelman famously shows how an appeal in the name of the children is a socially unquestioned norm, a value that underlines how politics is thought, and a structural position that allows no opposition. This compelling logical reproductive futurism firstly "impose/s/ an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity" (Edelman 2004: 2) and secondly, renders "unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relation" (*ibid.*). But is this – in Edelman's words – "capacity of queer sexualities to figure the radical dissolution of the contract, in every sense social and Symbolic, on which the future as putative assurance against the jouissance of the Real depends" (*ibid.*: 16), the real power of queer interventions in time?

As Jack Halberstam writes, queer temporality developed in part in opposition to the normative frames of the temporal – "in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (2005: 1). How are queer and time connected and how do they cross-cut? What could we name as queer temporality or how could we queer time; where does this temporality stem from and what is its potential to subvert socially accepted temporal norms? Queer time could be described as a multilayered and complex set of disparities between queer modes of existence and socially normative rhythms or sequences of time that are embedded in the institutions of the family, the matrix of reproduction, proper life transitions etc. To try to understand where queer temporality is coming from, and what its potentials are, let us limit ourselves to – and take a look at – temporality in connection to (queer) film.

New Queer Cinema (NQC) is the obvious choice as a phenomenon deeply connected with the death and mourning for those who died in the AIDS epidemic. The time of the emergence of NQC is therefore – at least for the queer community – strikingly similar to Gilles Deleuze's description of the emergence of time-images. If, for Deleuze, the break that "greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe" (Deleuze 1989, xi) (any-spaces-whatever), was the Second World War, Queer communities and NQC had a similar temporal rupture: that

of HIV and AIDS. This translated into images and characters similar to e. g. those found in the post-war *neorealism* or *nouvelle vague*. In a certain way, NQC's reformulation of the road movie is in deeply connected with alternative temporality: what we are watching is a journey of queer killers, drag queens, hustlers, and so on, without a definite objective or a destination, drifters whose movements are always pressed by time that is running out (examples of which are the now famous NQC films *My Own Private Idaho*, *Swoon*, *The Living End*). This is why NQC of the 1990s is also paradoxically and ironically aligned with the "End of History" hypothesis, rendering any utopian futurity a bad joke. What you have is the now and its momentarily pleasures. But to subscribe to this No Future paradigm or even to the End of History thesis that can then be too easily politically translated into the preposition post- (post-feminist for example), to readily accept only the annihilation and destruction part of queer temporalities, looks like a grim prospect. There is also another side to queer temporalities, the one that speaks about potentialities, experimentations, failures that become productive. To quote Freeman further, we can "reimagine 'queer' as a set of possibilities produced out of temporal and historical difference, or see the manipulation of time as a way to produce both bodies and relationalities (or even nonrelationality)" (2007: 159).

The queer lesson on time would therefore be more aligned with Catherine Malabou's "plastic ambiguity of time", that duality of "the progression, evolution, inflection, repetition, but also the instantaneous, the infinitely rapid, the bump, the accident, which appears to elude duration, or at least to introduce into the thickness of succession the undatable bifurcation of destruction, sharp as a claw, unpredictable, throbbing, magnificent" (Malabou 2012: 54). This interplay between a flow of time that is not – and this is important to note – teleologically ordained, and time cross-cut with ruptures, this interplay is crucial to notions of queer time and queering time. On a similar note and on a more concrete example, Judith Butler, in an obscure note in *Bodies that matter*, most clearly connects temporality and queer performance. She writes: "[...] it is important to underscore the effect of sedimentation that the temporality of construction implies". Temporality is in this vein constructed of "moments", where it is important to point out that "[...] 'moments' are not distinct and equivalent units of time" – that would be a reduction of temporality to time, she notes –

*for the 'past' will be the accumulation and congealing of such 'moments' to the point of their indistinguishability. But it will also consist of that which is refused from construction, the domains of the repressed, forgotten, and the irrecoverably foreclosed. That which is not included—exteriorized by boundary—as a phenomenal constituent of the sedimented effect called 'construction' will be as crucial to its definition as that which is included; this exteriority is not distinguishable as a 'moment' (2011: 187).*

The now almost dogmatic argument of queer theory goes as follows: Gender identity is a sedimentation of repetitious practice over time, a social temporality of sorts, while the origin of gender identity is a retrospective construct, but it is also imbued with failure and difference in repetition that would lay bare the constructedness of identity. To put it in the temporal terms of becoming, we are talking precisely about that plastic ambiguity of

time that would surprise, bend or even cut the sequential idea of time. This is what queer temporality is: it is like a "moment", but also a force; "a crossing of temporality with [an undeniable] force" (Barber and Clark 2002: 8).

A way to describe this temporal multiplicity in the tangible terms of social temporal rhythms and queer temporal alternatives is indicated by Butler herself, when she concludes the note with an appeal that one consults "the work of Pierre Bourdieu to understand the temporality of social construction" (2011: 188). His discussion on habitus has proven useful to think about "cultivation" in a temporal dimension, namely how subjects are made over time. This is how Bourdieu's points become important for feminist and queer theory, if we try to understand processes of subjectivation in connection to the temporal. To know how to time oneself and one's actions, to internalize cultural rhythms and time frames is crucial in achieving power, legibility etc. But as Freeman points out, timing can also be a part of a performance (performance here being something that is an intrinsic part of our daily practices), since it lays "bare the rules of gendered performance or a source for new experiences and understandings of gender. It can be a way, too, of catching the audience off guard, enticing or shaming or coaxing unexpected gendered or sexualized responses" (2007: 161).

There is a certain unlikely affinity between Butler's queer theory of parodic performance of gender and Deleuze's concepts of cinema, as noted by Theresa Geller (2006). In a similar way to how Butler's parodic acts reveal the "normal" or "original" as a copy, an ideal we can never embody, meaning parodic repetition always somehow fails but is also a disruption and thus potentially transformative (Butler 2001: 147), Deleuze's concept of time-image with its irrational cuts that destabilize the sensory-motor scheme of the movement-image thrusts us into a world without order or signposts and reveals not only a direct image of time as a "divergent pulsation or difference of incommensurable durations" but also life's power to become (Colebrook 2002: 40–41). Geller (2006) parallels Butler's performativity with Deleuze's or rather Bertold Brecht's notion of "gest" as a way of putting time into the body, thought into life (Deleuze 1989: 192). For Deleuze, gest is of course also importantly connected to the work of female directors:

*Female authors, female directors, do not owe their importance to militant feminism. What is more important is the way they have produced innovations in this cinema of bodies, as if women had to conquer the source of their own attitudes and the temporality which corresponds to them as individual or common gest ... (ibid.: 196-197).*

What both authors, Deleuze and Butler, despite their many differences, point out, is the importance of the in-between, the temporal disruption, the interval between acts of reproducing gender or between stimulation and response (importantly applicable to cinema), which is for Deleuze "[...] constitutive of but irreducible to subjectivity: it is the ungraspable nonperception that alone makes subjective perception possible" (Shaviro 2006: 51).

In this formulation of the interval, affect is a crucial link to think not only the moment of intensity before the fixation of meaning, an interval wherein multiple answers to stimulus are possible, but an important link for any theory of cinema, which moves beyond a

"linguistic" analysis of what a film means. Not only does the intensity of affect, a preindividual, presubjective force of potential transformation, affect the body<sup>1</sup> but also, as Claire Colebrook notes: "Through affect art restores time's disruptive power. We no longer see life as some unified whole that goes through time; we see divergent becomings, movements or temporalities *from which* the whole would be derived." (2002: 40). For issues of temporality in the Deleuzian reading, Henri Bergson's work (too extensive to be analyzed in this article) is important. For our purposes, it is important that he proposes perception and affectivity as two tendencies, the former characterized by space, the latter by time: "Perception orients the living being towards matter, spatiality, and the world; it prepares one to act, while affection moves in the direction of temporality, memory, and mind, the durational flow of life in which differences are qualitative and so invite reflection [...]" (Olkowski 2002: 16). The interval in which affect arises therefore "makes it possible for us to reflect and act differently or to choose not to act at all" (*ibid.*: 17) (perception is of course imbued with habit and can produce habitual answers to stimulus). However, this "moment of indetermination" can also be "a matter of the creation of new modes of existence" (*ibid.*). The second important point of the Deleuzian reading of Bergson is that affectivity organizes the body temporally. "This affective contraction influences the body and so organizes it temporally, literally creating a temporal duration such that the contraction of each new present (from outside to inside) is simultaneously the upsurge of the body's past and future" (*ibid.*: 18).

To try to explain the disrupting power of the affective or a potential for the new in the interval, it is noteworthy to quote Massumi at length:

*[...] the primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between content and effect: it would appear that the strength or duration of an image's effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way. This is not to say that there is no connection and no logic. What is meant here by the content of the image is its indexing to conventional meanings in an intersubjective context, its socio-linguistic qualification. This indexing fixes the determinate qualities of the image; the strength or duration of the image's effect could be called its intensity. What comes out here is that there is no correspondence or conformity between qualities and intensity. If there is a relation, it is of another nature. ... the event of image reception is multi-leveled, or at least bi-level. There is an immediate bifurcation in response into two systems. One, the level of intensity, is characterized by a crossing of semantic wires: on it, sadness is pleasant. The level of intensity is organized according to a logic that does not admit of the excluded middle. This is to say that it is not semantically or semiotically ordered. It does not fix distinctions. Instead, it vaguely but insistently connects what is normally indexed as separate. When asked*

1. Here, we must remember the body has the capacity to affect and be affected and that the cinematic experience or rather event is intertwined with the body. In this experience, the body is not an obstacle to thought, the body is not something that thought would have to overcome, but "... that which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life" (Deleuze 1989: 189).

to signify itself, it can only do so in a paradox. There is disconnection of signifying order from intensity – which constitutes a different order of connection operating in parallel. The gap noted earlier is not only between content and effect. It is also between the form of content – signification as a conventional system of distinctive difference – and intensity. The disconnection between form/content and intensity/effect is not just negative: it enables a different connectivity, a different difference, in parallel (Massumi 1995: 85).

What the interval between form/content and intensity/effect enables is establishing new connections in a different way, a reformulation of difference. Both levels, Massumi writes, are embodied immediately: content as a mixture of conscious expectations, positioning oneself in the narrative and visceral (breathing, pulse), intensity as a visceral reaction on the skin, “[...] disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration [...]” (*ibid.*).

To try to connect temporality, affectivity and becoming – so important for imagining transformation and new forms of politics – we could schematically take concepts of movement-image and time-image. Through the first one, we can think about a hegemonic perception – the movement of events in linear time – which presupposes a subject; through the second, we can see what happens when cinema disconnects a straightforward subject-position and causality, when the viewer is confronted with the image and put into the position of active reformulation, negotiation, and when an image prompts “evocative contemplation”, the temporality of which includes a journey through networks of memory instead of movement-action’s progression forward (Marks 2000: 48). What Laura Marks describes in the context of intercultural film, stands both for queer and for feminist films: when attentive perception fails to remember, it creates, creatively imagines, inscribes imagined histories and alternative notions of knowledge.

This is why cinema is such a powerful artform: the same “techniques [it] uses to follow life – image sequences – can also be used to transform life, by disrupting sequences” (Colebrook 2002: 31), as well as put into motion a becoming: “A thing (such as the human) can transform its whole way of becoming through an encounter with what it is not, in this case the camera” (*ibid.*: 37). As Colebrook asserts, Deleuze’s Cinema books “unfold his philosophy of time” that is “[...] more than just a ‘philosophy’; for it is only if we rethink time, Deleuze argued, that we will be able to transform ourselves and our future” (*ibid.*).

What Deleuzian philosophy clearly implies but often omits and what queer and feminist theory inscribe into concepts of interval and affect, is the materiality of the body, specifically the disruptive power of the feminine or the queer body. Following Butler and Grosz, Geller (2006) writes, for example, how “the ‘time-image’ of gender is located in the queer body”, the disconnection of sex, gender and (heterosexual) desire, pointing out how “the time-image of cinema and the queer body are similarly destabilizing because of their similar source material—the affects of an impersonal unconscious.” Similarly, Luce Irigaray, in her feminist rendition of the interval, points out how an interval is a potential gap, wherein difference and relations are redefined. Her redefinition of difference is of course intimately and tactically intertwined with sexual difference but not, contrary to the common opinion, as an essentialist biological notion. For her, the female body is bound to notions of fluidity, a body of intensities and affectivity capable of mutations and



transformations: "Our depth is the thickness of our body, our all touching itself. Where top and bottom, inside and outside, in front and behind, above and below are not separated, remote, out of touch. Our all intermingled" (1985: 213).

If we take into account the affectivity at work in cinema, the multiple temporalities of becoming and the female/queer body as the body of destabilization, a location whereby transformation can occur but which also surpasses all kinds of fixed subjectivity, our next task is to analyze what kind of images will then break the temporal illusion of teleologically ordained futures? How do the interval and affectivity of cinema change relations, destabilize categories, subjectivities, segmental systems and at the same time open up new meanings, new point of views, and becomings? The questions that remain are: how to think temporality and liable feminist futurities, as well as how to think of a concept of queer time as not only destructive, a momentary bump or a rupture in duration, which is, one could argue, a necessary condition for transformation, but also a vitalist force? What are its potentialities for a different kind of life? To try to think about this, I am going to go back to the 1980s and to Lizzie Borden's 1983 dystopian feminist sci-fi film *Born in Flames*.

### **3 Feminism's Movements Towards Difference: *Born in Flames***

If ever there was a film – for me at least – that aligned affect with theory, it has to be *Born in Flames*. My viewing experience of the film was an hour and 20 minutes of recognition, intensive impulses, parallelisms between the film and my present and transformations. Lizzie Borden, a director who in her puberty took the name of a famous (never convicted and supposedly lesbian) killer, lived in New York during the time that Ruby Rich described in her book *New Queer Cinema* as the "moment in between the women's liberation movement and a full-scale AIDS epidemic, in between feminism's consciousness-raising groups and lesbian power-brokering, in between Reagan and... Reagan" (2013: 203). In this sense, *Born in Flames* is a movie that is clearly contextualized in time and space: stemming from civil rights movements on the one hand and being a critique of their outcomes on the other. But at the same time, the film is incredibly up-to-date, as if this sci-fi is speaking about our time (with the exception of a socialist state) and as if the essence of time that presents itself as progressive and teleologically ordained is a constant repetition of violence. The film works on (at least) two temporal levels that embody Freeman's point on manipulation of time as a way to produce both bodies and relationalities, but from different perspectives: on the one hand, we have the time of the state, imbued with racial, gender, sexual and class inequalities, and on the other, the time of the women rebels who are trying to redefine and queer temporality, the body and relations.

The fragmented narrative is set in New York and tells a story about a post-revolutionary American society after a peaceful socialist revolution 10 years ago. The narrative focuses on different groups of women: two underground radio stations, Radio Ragazza, run by a punk-rocker Isabel and Radio Phoenix, run by an African-American woman Honey, the Women's Army whose leaders are Adelaide Norris and an older lawyer Zella, as well as a group of young female editors from the *Youth Socialist Review*, a pro-government

newspaper. It quickly becomes clear that this post-revolutionary socialist society is far from a utopia. Rather, it perpetuates pre-revolutionary structures of violence and control and replicates previous class, gender and racial inequalities. Even though the revolution happened a decade ago, it seems nothing much has changed for the women, especially for women of colour, poor and queer women.

The story is partly told through documentary style shots, partly through surveillance reports on the women by the postrevolutionary equivalent of the FBI, and TV reports. The dynamic montage in the film cross-cuts shots of guerrilla groups of women on bicycles rescuing other women from street harassment and violence with punk concerts, meetings of women's groups, and voices of state agents describing the women's movements. It shows physical workers and women who clearly produce and reproduce the working force of the state – take care of the children, work in offices, factories, wash the dishes, wrap up chickens in plastic foil and penises in condoms – as well as television propaganda which broadcasts false reports on unemployment, female rebels and violence. Different feminist groups join in the rebellion when Adelaide Norris is jailed and dies in suspicious circumstances, having returned from visiting a militant rebel female group in West Sahara, and both underground radio stations go up in flames. The film ends with a surprising and rather shocking event, a historical time rupture if there ever was one, especially for the post-9/11 generation: the feminists blow up the World Trade Center, starting a series of events we can only imagine.

A quick look at the film's trivia reveals a cross-cut between the life trajectories of the actors and activists – Borden's friends –, and their characters in the film: Zella, the militant feminist is portrayed by a real-life lawyer and activist Florynce Kennedy, who is known for defending Valerie Solanas after she shot Andy Warhol in his studio The Factory. *Born in Flames* pays tribute to another referential point in her activism, an organized peeing of women on Harvard's campus, protesting the fact that almost all toilets on campus were meant for men. Thus, in the film, Zella says: "All oppressed people have a right to violence. It's like the right to pee: you've gotta have the right place, you've gotta have the right time, you've gotta have the appropriate situation." Kathryn Bigelow who has since *Born in Flames* become one of the few influential female directors in Hollywood, plays one of the editors of the *Young Socialist Review*, who throughout most of the film regards feminist organizing as separatism. Retrospectively, it is an interesting coincidence that she represents a state-friendly feminism in the film; her character being a woman who is working within the system (state or Hollywood), through a specific medium to justify the state.

Both of the women do not only represent two poles of feminism, with most of the other groups in the film in-between, but also (through the cross-cut of film fiction with real-life trajectories) speak of the temporality of feminist struggle. *Born in Flames* is critical of Marxism, socialism, and capitalism as forms of state ideologies as well as of feminism if it takes upon itself to be a unified political platform. It would seem that the dystopian future of film fiction points out that a true social transformation – let us call it a revolution – cannot happen if it does not account for difference, in the case of *Born in Flames*, an intersectionality of differences. What *Born in Flames* most provocatively critiques on

another level, is the production of normative time: not only normative time of state institutions and institutions of reproductive futurity, but also of civil rights movements' concepts of progressive temporalities. The state has a socialist president, New York a socialist mayor, but everything else stays the same and functions as a temporal prison: there is no future in this socialist democracy, only a replication of the same. Revolution turns into reform and reform becomes patience. The film makes a smart use of this instinctual suspicion that we are in a time loop, patiently waiting for something that is not coming. It produces a feeling of dissonance, the queer feeling that, when watching the movie in 2016 (and, I would imagine, in 1983), what we are seeing are real-time events – the fashion and the landscape are no different in this dystopian future. Similarly, Stephen Dillon states in his take on the film: “the future within the film is not the future that awaits us, but the present and past we are and have been living” (2013: 39).

The state of this dystopian society is too familiar: it is in an economic crisis, people are jobless and have gone to the streets to protest against those who are stealing their work – women and other minorities – and supposedly have too many privileges. The state responds by firing women, preferentially employing men who are caregivers, and promising paid housework. Even though the latter means a revolutionary monetary assessment of reproductive and productive private work, it is far from a liberation of women. On the contrary, Borden's emphasis is more aligned with Monique Wittig's notion of heterosexual contract (2001), trapping women in the film into reproductive heterosexual work. Borden first wanted to name the film *Guerrillas* after Wittig's book *Les Guérillères*, a fiction about an Amazonian female war against men, but was afraid people would start calling it *Gorillas*. However, she clearly shows an affinity to Wittig's lesbian feminism. Wittig was critical of Marxism exactly because it put a notion of class difference above all others, meaning that, in the long run, there never is and cannot be a time or a place to reflect on other forms of discrimination and subjugation. In a similar way, Borden picks a socialist dystopia for her film to show that the left is not exempt from criticism, to show what happens to the left if it is not in constant reflection of itself, when it is not a tool of political emancipation, criticism and transformation, when it starts becoming, but reifies in a new (or should I say old) patriarchal structure of young, (mostly) white men, that have the support of theory and power. This point could be described using a distinctly temporal notion: the film is a criticism of the moment when the movement stops, the movement, which would prevent a constant return of the same.

The women in the film are revolutionaries who believe in the revolution and its delayed effects that they have been waiting for; not for 10 years but for entire lifetimes and generations. Borden then poses a fairly simple question: What if those women were tired of waiting? What if everyday sexism, exhaustions, silences, violence and fears became too strong and culminated in a militant revolt? In the destruction of symbols that are not their own? In the destruction of a language that does not speak about them? *Born in Flames* can pose these questions in a politically potent way exactly because it works in the in-between: between documentary and fiction, as a feminist experimental political platform, a space to reflect on factual political issues and potential transformations. And, at the same time, as a sci-fi film, purposefully pointing out that we are dealing with fiction: the director herself

poses that she does not believe that women will ever surpass other differences to unite in a common struggle (Sussler 1983).

It is exactly because of this scepticism that is inscribed into the film, that *Born in Flames* is also a political criticism of feminist theories that were, by the 1980s obviously very white, middle-class, heterosexual and making their way into the academia. Borden inscribed into the movie the idea of a necessity of pluralism and different voices in feminism on the one hand and relationality of different struggles that would not mean the end of autonomy for any of them on the other. The outcome is a juxtaposition of voices, accents, poetry, music, activism, ways of living or, to paraphrase, the outcome is a multiplicity of difference, wherein every woman experiments with her own language. It is not a coincidence that most of state functionaries, pro-government editors, TV reporters and agents are white and most of the activists and workers that start a new transformation are African-American, Hispanic, Asian, punks and lesbians. And it is befitting that their means of resistance are neither theory (which does not speak about them much) nor a transformation of the state apparatus (they do not have the access to it), but the radio, bikes, and action in impoverished communities that eventually transform into militant revolt. *Black women, be ready. White women, get ready. Red women, stay ready, for this is our time and all must realize it*, says Honey, one of the activists, through the radio waves, opening up the potential of another kind of temporality and community.

Borden clearly shows the importance of the intersectionality of positions, differences in ourselves and between the women. At the same time, Borden, as Teresa de Lauretis (1987) points out, reformulates women's film, rewrites it and rethinks all social concepts through the prism of a gendered social subject. At this point, we come back to the time loop of a classical problem of feminist futurity in film studies, described by Laura Mulvey in various essays (1989) and Borden in her film: if feminist cinema's main task is a deconstruction of patriarchal meanings in concepts, what Irigaray has famously developed through the concept of phallogocentrism or Mulvey's feminist film theory through the "male gaze", than the next crucial step of feminist art is to create new meanings, new conditions in which women can speak for themselves, beyond definitions, ideas and concepts of femininity prescribed by phallogocentrism. A reformulation that is as much experimental as it is urgent introduces into the cinematic experience new models of visibility, concepts of community and subjectivation. De Lauretis, watching *Born in Flames*, thus writes:

These films do not put me in the place of the female spectator, do not assign me a role, a self-image, a positionality in language or desire. Instead, they make a place for what I will call me, knowing that I don't know it, and give "me" space to try to know, to see, to understand. Put another way, by addressing me as a woman, they do not bind me or appoint me as Woman (de Lauretis 1985: 171–172).

*Born in Flames*, she continues, is not a film which would interpellate its viewer, but a film: [...] whose images and discourses project back to the viewer a space of heterogeneity, differences and fragmented coherences that just do not add up to one individual viewer or one spectator-subject, bourgeois or otherwise. There is no one-to-one match between the film's discursive heterogeneity and the discursive boundaries of any one spectator (ibid:172).

No position in the film is then instantly translatable to a fixed position of any viewer, working in the in-between, what one could call molar segmentations of class, gender, sex, sexuality, race etc., at the same time working on the level of intensities, the changing rhythms of the music and points-of-view having a visceral effect even before the interpretation moves in, before habitual segmentation happens. This is what the interval and affect would look like and it is crucial to conceptualize their potential to disrupt the order of meaning through cinema, which can put our worlds in order through linear temporality of the narrative, as well as disrupt them, disconnect the stimulus and the habitual answer. As Colebrook writes:

*But the power of art to produce disruptive affect allows us to think intensities, to think the powers of becoming from which our ordered and composed world emerges. Cinema frees affect or the power of images from a world of coherent bodies differing only in degree, and opens up divergent lines of movement to differences in kind. Cinema short-circuits, if you like, the sensory-motor schema that governs our perception. For the most part, in everyday vision, we see and act, and we see in order to act. This is why we see a simplified world of extended objects, for we see what concerns us. In cinema the eye is disengaged from unified action, presented with images that prompt affective rather than cognitive responses (2002: 39–40).*

The task in this post-world is to think of the break from time prisons and habitual repetitions. Questions of history, especially affective queer histories not bound by linear temporalities, not subsumed into categorizations, are an important part of the equation for political action and have been fairly well-researched in the last decades. They have generated important methodological tools for reading against the grain, rereading images, and posing questions of alternative systems of knowledge. But politics, as noted by Elizabeth Grosz (2000), is always intimately connected to questions of the new, the future and becoming. What *Born in Flames* urges us to do is to rethink the concept of revolution and what it entails, and if its becoming entails reactive or active powers. As Grosz writes, a revolution is:

*[...] a term that seemed to flourish in the zeal of the 1960s, an old-fashioned idea, an idea that isn't as "revolutionary" as provocative of the new, as its heralding discourses (Marxism, socialism, anarchism, feminism) once proclaimed? Is it on fact a short-hand formulation for the contrary of revolution or upheaval; that's, predictable transformation, transformation that follows a predetermined or directed goal (the rule of the proletariat, autonomous self-regulation, an equal share for women in social organisation), that is, controlled and directed transformations? Or does revolution or upheaval entail more disconcerting idea of unpredictable transformations, upheavals in directions and arenas which cannot be known in advance and whose results are inherently uncertain? This is clearly a dangerous and disconcerting idea, seeing that revolution can carry no guarantees that it will improve the prevailing situation, ameliorate existing conditions, or provide something preferable to what exists now (2000: 215).*

Thus, *Born in Flames* poses the task of reclaiming the concepts of futurity, not as a fixed teleology, but as an open-endedness, the form of which we cannot yet imagine, but is for this very same reason an important task for feminist and queer studies. Grosz points out that the interplay between the orientation towards the present and the one towards the future are (and must be) paralleled in feminist politics: if we would only orient towards the future, the actualization of virtuality, we would lose sight of the everyday struggles that are a precondition for thinking about the new. If we should only focus on immediate struggles, we would find ourselves trapped inside their frame, "[...] unable to adequately rise above or displace them, stuck in the immediacy of a present with no aspirations to or pretensions of something different, something better. Without some conception of a new and fresh future, struggles in the present cannot or would not be undertaken or would certainly remain ineffective" (*ibid.*: 216).

What *Born in Flames* shows is a need for feminism to function twofold: to revolt against the state institutions, everyday sexism, and habitual categorizations, but at the same time to imagine new ways of connecting, to make use of temporal ruptures, asynchronies and to queer the body or even harness the queer body's disruptive powers. There is also an affinity between queer theory and Deleuzian philosophy that could be productive: queer temporal interventions in *Born in Flames* inscribe in the teleological movement of history time that is out of joint, thus opening it up to fragmentations and temporal reconceptualizations of politics that can no longer function on the prepositions of linear progression, a true political subject and unified people. "The people no longer exist, or not yet ... the people are missing" (1989: 216), says Deleuze famously of a modern political film. As we have already noted in the case of feminism, he admits a necessity to work strategically both on a molar level and at the same time on the molecular level of experimentation, becoming and difference, a necessity which he describes as a double impossibility: "that of forming a group and that of not forming a group" (*ibid.*: 219). But acting from this impossibility does not need to be a pessimist predicament for experimenting with different queer and feminist pasts, presents and futures, relations and bodies. As one of the leaders of Women's Army Zella (played by Flo Kennedy) says: "They always talk about unity. We need unity, unity, but I always say, if you were the army, and the school, and the head of the health institutions, and the head of the government, and all of you had guns, which would you rather see come through the door: one lion, unified, or 500 mice? My answer is 500 mice can do a lot of damage and disruption."

#### 4 Conclusion: Cinema's Transformative Power

*We believed (I go on believing) that the liberation of women is a wedge driven into all other radical thought, can open up the structures of resistance, unbind the imagination, connect what's been dangerously disconnected.* (Rich 1994: 214)

To take cinema seriously is to be opened up to its transforming powers. An answer to the question of what a film does is not a one-way application of concepts to a cinematic work, but an openness to be taken completely by surprise, unable to conceptually grasp

what is happening, as well as being able to go with the flow. In this article, we tried to write down what cinema tells us about the concepts of feminism and temporality, concepts of the now and potentialities of the new, molar and molecular politics. Feminism and queer theory have always worked in-between structures and fluidity, between being active in the now and imagining the new, but *Born in Flames* rather brutally touches us through time with great effect and affect, showing a necessity, now more than ever, to rethink notions of our futurity.

In this sense, subjugated bodies – in our case queer and untamed female bodies – play a crucial part in a temporal rupture, which can have the potential to bring about change. We have already written that queer modes of life (in the analysed film and in the everyday) produce and are produced from fragmented temporalities that cannot be easily subjugated to notions of reproductive futurity, family temporality, essentialism or generational inheritances. Queer temporalities speak of failures, bastard loyalties, casual encounters, transitory meanings of the flesh that at first glance have nothing to do with a time-bound faith in meaningful narrativized life trajectories. The work on queer temporality does not only question stories of origin and essentialisms but also progressivist ideas of a better tomorrow. This, however, does not mean that what queer theory brings to the table is only a total queer destruction or a temporality of the moment. If Edelman takes the denial of the future and the embracement of the death drive as legitimate queer political opposition (even, as the only opposition available), other queer theorists are less inclined to do so, attempting rather to write about affective queer history, not with a sense of nostalgia for times past and lost, but out of the fragments and omissions in time, or imagining a community that in a way always implies temporal transmissions to the future – as does the act of writing or film-making itself. These transmissions are quite different from a progressive teleology; they take into account a queer affect that is temporally unique, impossible to describe in terms of development, socially accepted rhythms and repetitions, but rather conceivable in terms of surprises, irrationalities, delays, anachronisms. At the same time, these transmissions consider a force that crosses temporality and bodies, making new or not-yet-formed affective communities without familial ties through multiple moments in time. There is a certain vitalism in this present moment if we are open to the idea that it can grow in multiple directions, open up potentialities that may or may not become a matter of future, and start thinking about those yet undefined futurities in new, rather than habitual ways.

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## Author's data

Jasmina Šepetavc, doktorska študentka študijev spolov  
 KUD Anarhiv, Metelkova ulica 6, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija  
 jasmina.sepetavc@gmail.com