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Nothing Personal ?!
Essays on Affect, Gender and Queerness
Omar Kasmani, Matthias Lüthjohann, Sophie Nikoleit and Jean-Baptiste Pettier (Eds.)

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Radical Boredom
Feminist and Queer Politics of Affect in Experimental Film

Johanna Renard

At the dawn of the 1960s, boredom has appeared as a new terrain of artistic experiment in Europe and North America. No longer regarded as an emotion either to be avoided or sublimated, *ennui* was at the center of artists' new concerns with ordinary everyday life. From John Cage's groundbreaking music experiments with time and repetition to the extended duration, the monotony, and the flatness in Andy Warhol's sixties films, intentional boredom became a formal and radical aesthetic premise. Deliberately trying to make their work boring, some Northern American experimental filmmakers, such as Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton, used boredom as a way and a means of putting emphasis on the very structure of film. Within the structural cinema, a cinema of structure, materiality, and anti-illusionism which was theorized by the film critic P. Adams Sitney, boredom was used as a tool for calling into question the temporality of the "society of spectacle" (Guy Debord).[1]

Similarly, boredom as an aesthetic held a powerful place in the European experimental and independent cinema created by women from the 1960s onward, as can be seen in the films of Agnès Varda, Jackie Raynal, or Marguerite Duras. As highlighted by the seminal work of Patrice Petro on feminism and film history, boredom is an essential dimension of western women's experience of modernity and postmodernity. [2] The feeling of *ennui*, combined with an exceedingly prosaic audiovisual language, is indeed inherently linked to women's cinema aesthetic. I also realized that intentional boredom was a recurring affect in lesbian avant-garde films, ranging from Chantal Akerman to Barbara Hammer, from Abigail Child to Yvonne Rainer, and from Su Friedrich to Ulrike Ottinger. Redefining the modes of narrating and representing, their cinema challenges heterosexual spectatorial expectations by working against mainstream cinematic conventions. Minimalist *mise-en-scène*, streams of voiceover narration, found footage, slowness, silence, and duration: a large part of lesbian avant-garde movies encourage intensified *ennui*.

In the context of the turn to affect in the humanities and social sciences, feminist and queer theories have provided important insights into the gendered dimensions of emotions in films.[3] Approaching cultural practices from a minoritarian perspective, the work of Ann Cvetkovich on affects and trauma in lesbian subcultures shows that cultural objects are repositories of feelings and emotions.[4] Following the lead of her inspirational project to build a vast archive of queer emotional cultures, my investigation raises questions about the affective aesthetics and politics in underground lesbian films. How does boredom matter in queer women alternative cinema? To address this issue, I will look more closely at the films of three lesbian movie directors: *Je tu il elle* by Chantal Akerman, *Sink or Swim* by Su Friedrich, and *MURDER and murder* by Yvonne Rainer. In connection with my PhD thesis on the poetics and politics of boredom in the film and dance of Yvonne Rainer, I argue that these filmmakers have explored this peculiar emotion as an aesthetic response, a phenomenological

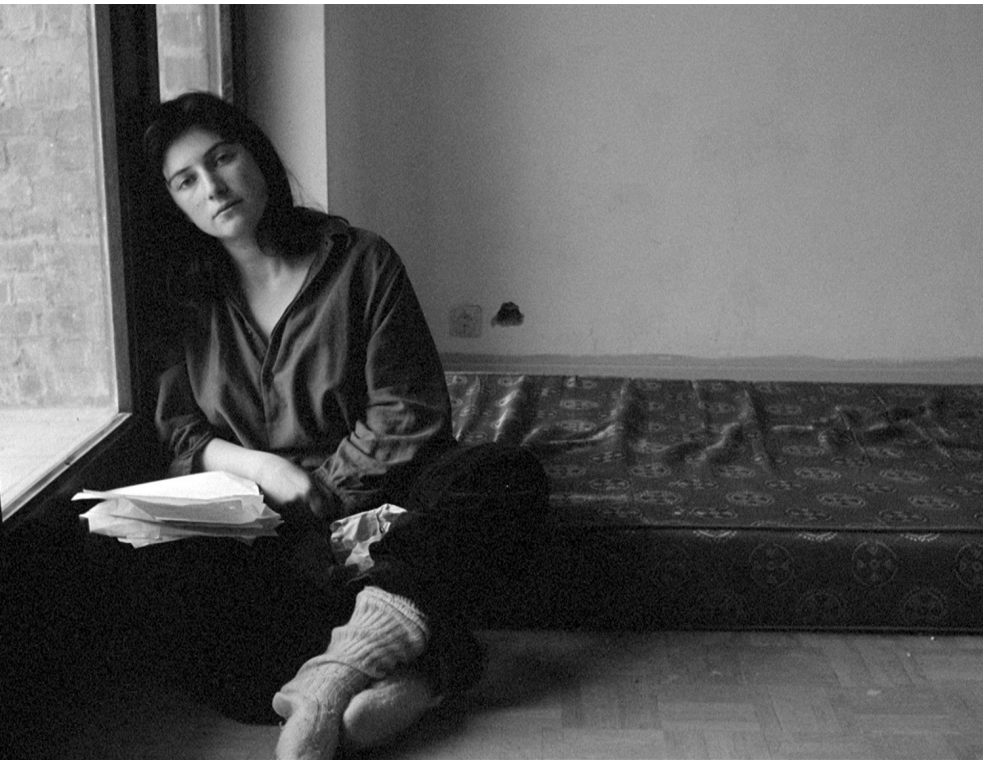
problem, and a political strategy.[5] In what follows, I analyze how these movies put forward a critical as well as a radical use of the experience of boredom by evoking the complexities of lesbian representation and desire.

As a complex and ambivalent phenomenon, boredom is the subject of increasing interest across the areas of the humanities and social sciences. From a few landmark publications, primarily in the fields of philosophy and literary studies,[6] it has evolved into an independent area of research.[7] Following Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Georg Simmel, most of recent scholarly treatments read boredom as a key concept for exploring subjectivity in modernity and in contemporary capitalism, as a response to a highly mechanized and hyperactive life, or as a state of mind resulting of a general loss of meaning and or social and economic change.[8] Traditionally dismissed as a threatening "psychic inadequacy" or inertia, boredom is often considered as an unpleasant and negative state of mind in the Western context. Nevertheless, if one considers the history of the multifaceted manifestations of this feeling, some of its variations have been dignified and considered as a noble suffering of the soul, as through Baudelaire's spleen or the sublime *ennui* described by Musset, Flaubert, or Stendhal. At the opposite end, excluded from this European metaphysical definition of "ennui," women's boredom has been stigmatized and dismissed as a pathological state of the body, exemplified by the bodily/psychic symptoms of the female neurasthenic or the tedious and inane daily life of the housewife confined at home. The gendered nature of modern boredom in literature, as a seemingly negative state, has notably been strongly emphasized by Patricia Spacks or Allison Pease, revealing that the lower "form" of boredom has been associated with materiality, banality, and femininity.[9] With the advent of the contemporary women's movement, feminist theoreticians, such as Betty Friedan in the *Feminine Mystique* (1963), have pointed out that gender and sexual differences produce boredom, in the way that patriarchal

Chantal Akerman. *Saute ma ville*, 1968, 35 mm, black and white, sound, 13 minutes. Film still.

structures limit and contain desires for sexual transformation and social change.[10] As Patrice Petro brought to light in her seminal article "After Shock, Between Boredom and History" (1993), the rise of boredom as "both an aesthetic response and a phenomenological problem" is at stake in feminist art practices, particularly in avant-garde performance and film.[11] Elaborating a counter-cinema, in opposition to the heterosexist visual and narrative standards perpetuated by the movie industry, women filmmakers have investigated the formal and political radicalness of boredom. Through text, sound, and image, their works explore the experience of an endless, stagnant, and fruitless temporality.

Chantal Akerman is amongst the most widely recognized female filmmakers who have developed an aesthetic of boredom. Until her suicide in 2015, she devoted most of her cinema to the close and realist examination of women's lives. At the age of eighteen, she made the short-film *Saute ma ville* (1968), in which a young woman performs a frantic rebellion against the rituals of feminine domesticity. Confined in her small kitchen, humming constantly, she obsessively but oddly carries out her tasks: cooking and eating quite properly, then polishing her socks and legs or duct-taping the door, before opening the gas to blow up the apartment and herself. Already fiercely minimalist, the Belgian filmmaker's aesthetic was then strongly affected by the prominent Northern American structural film movement, which she encountered during a lengthy stay in New York in 1971-72. In the following decade, Akerman shared with Andy Warhol and Michael Snow the ambition to explore cinematic hyperrealism, literal representation of everydayness and extended duration. Nevertheless, unlike the experimental filmmakers, she maintained narrative and character construction. Made in Belgium in 1974 with a tight budget, her first full feature film, *Je tu il elle*, was shot in eight days in a grainy black and white. With a cast of three actors (including Akerman herself), the film is divided into three equal-length segments: abandoned by *tu* (you), *je* (I), played by Akerman, briefly encounters *il* (he), a lonely truck driver, before ending her journey at the house of a girlfriend, *elle*



Chantal Akerman. *Je tu il elle*, 1974, 35 mm, black and white, sound, 90 minutes. Film still.

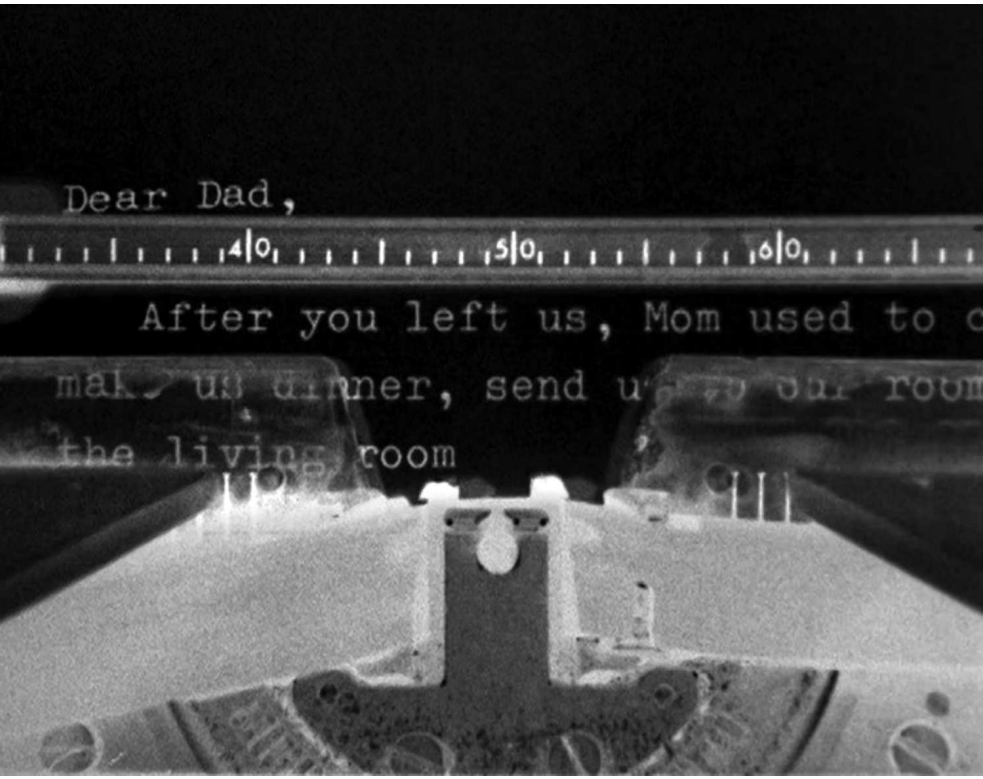
(she). Consisting of very minimal actions, enclosed in a small and austere room, the first half an hour of *Je tu il elle* is made of a series of very long fixed frames. Akerman's monotone voice-over narrates her desperate desire to write to *tu* (you) after their breakup, describing meticulously her self-inflected twenty-eight days confinement and her avoidance activities. All this time, we watch her rearranging the furniture, undressing, sleeping, and thinking. In some kind of rigorous asceticism, she spends a long time naked, lying on the mattress, eating spoonfuls of sugar, and arranging the many pages of her letter on the floor. But, at the end, she is merely waiting for something to happen, for something to end this sickening litany.

Starting a movie with such a deceptive and minimalist sequence, entirely shaped by real time, the stance of waiting, austerity, and descriptive narration, is a very strong and committed filmic gesture. The complete section disrupts the traditional idea of cinematic time. Indeed, films traditionally manipulate temporality in order to artificially fit the time of the things narrated. In *Je tu il elle*, even the usual need for maintaining the viewer's focus is discarded. This creates an effect of "nothing happening," conveyed through factual information and movements, relentless repetitions, and duration.[12] The movie provides a deeply ontological experience of *boredom*: the boredom that a young woman "waiting for something to happen" inflicts on herself and on the viewers, between apathy and masochism. The distilled boredom is built in a diffuse manner, like an affective tone covering the real as a whole: gray days that succeed each other indiscriminately, a time that extends without limit, a dismal space, the repetition of the same ordinary gestures, a blank voice-over. If, as Gaston Bachelard asserts "time is a reality confined to the instant" and "being is conscious of itself only in the present instant,"[13] Akerman makes the viewers experience the present moment on a physical as well as on an affective level, or more precisely, in a corporeal way. For the thirty minutes in which seemingly *nothing happens*, the film reveals the blossoming of the protagonist's "I" (*je*), through a corporeal experimentation of her being-in-the-world, through the body and voice. The

Su Friedrich. *Sink or Swim*, 1990, 16 mm, black and white, sound, 48 minutes. Film still.

narrator voice-over seems to represent the reality and temporality of feminine consciousness, rarely explored in the male-dominated film narratives and representations. It is precisely by the use of an empty and unproductive state of mind, by the production of strong boredom, that Akerman provides a room of one's own to express a dissenting queer woman's subjectivity.

It seems to me that the relationship between boredom and waiting, that is to say waiting without purpose, is crucial to feminist and queer aesthetics. This is particularly evident in the U.S. experimental filmmaker Su Friedrich's under-recognized work. She has produced and directed twenty-three 16mm films and digital videos, mostly made in black and white, including *Hide and Seek* (1996), *Rules of the Road* (1993), and *Damned If You Don't* (1987).[14] A melancholic and ambivalent autobiographical meditation, *Sink or Swim* (1990) is a collage of black and white images, mostly found footage in association with voice-over narration. The film consists of twenty-six episodes dealing with the broken relationship of the narrator with an absent and abusive father. The narrative is structured by the alphabet in reverse, echoing the profession of Friedrich's father, a linguist. As suggested by the film's title, his behavior was often cruel: in the "Realism" chapter, Friedrich recounts how her father taught her how to swim by tossing her into the deep end of a swimming pool. Told in the third person, the little girl's painful memories are shared in a distant tone of voice, without ever forcing the spectator to experience empathy. Throughout the movie, most of the video footage consists of idealized sitcoms or mundane images of fathers and daughters. In a combination of formal inventiveness, *Sink or Swim* separates the soundtrack and the image track while developing a range of intersections between them. Nevertheless, the majority of what we see in the film does not document or dramatize what the narrator is recounting. The affect of boredom is pervasive, remarkably in the part entitled "Ghosts," in which there is no spoken narration. Raising the question of representation and the word-image relationship,



Su Friedrich. *Sink or Swim*. "Ghost." Film still.

this sequence purely consists of a close-up and negative image of a typewriter, while an invisible hand types a letter to the father. Expressing a deep sense of loss, the text reminisces about a record of Schubert's *Lieder* that her mother listened to tirelessly after her husband's departure. By choosing to present this memory through text rather than through images, Su Friedrich offers a "cinema of the mind," wherein the film takes place in the viewers' imagination. During this slow and long sequence, the task of reading imposed on the audience makes it possible to keep a distance from the traumatic memory. The viewer's lengthy wait echoes the painful expectation of an illusory return of the father. Simply accompanied by the sound of the typewriter, "Ghosts" highlights the difficulty of self-representation. As the Canadian film theorist Catherine Russell expresses it, "difficulty of lesbian representation becomes that of cinematic representation. 'Identity' becomes dispersed across a cultural spectrum of 'positions' and discourses."[15] Throughout the film, the various sources *of* visual and auditory imagery create a psychic flow, refusing to convey any evident and clear linear narrative or emotion. In other words, by mobilizing materials in ways that allow for complex identifications and that open up temporal relations, the film shows a preoccupation with ambivalence. As Judith Mayne has observed, Friedrich's work opens up "space for contemplation, for reflection on both the specificity of lesbian desire and the impossibility of fixing that desire to one specific image or narrative."[16] Narrating her personal history in third-person, questioning the very nature of heterocentric representation itself and the male tradition of autobiographical narrative, she archives and exposes the fragmented queer childhood memories. In order to distance herself from her own traumas, Su Friedrich achieves a decentering of the authorial voice as well as a narrative and visual emotional detachment. Since trauma is fundamentally unspeakable and unrepresentable, since its structural foundation is permanent absence and perpetual presentness, it seems that the specific temporality of boredom is well adapted to encompass the traces of it. Through narrative time, repetition, sound-image

Yvonne Rainer. *MURDER and murder*, 1996, 16 mm, color, sound,113 minutes. Film still.

disjunctions, Friedrich engages with the specific temporality of subjectivity, which does not follow the logic of linear development. By inspiring boredom and frustration, Su Friedrich's film enables a "will-to-connect differently" to the audience, provoking its capacity for waiting and reflection. Regarding the films of Antonioni, Roland Barthes wrote: "To look longer than expected [...] disturbs established orders of every kind, to the extent that normally the time of the look is controlled by society."[17] Speaking from the position of a lesbian subject, Friedrich uses the experimental process to allow for a critical force of transgression, providing an alternative to productive time, affect, and bodies.

As the very affect of empty time and as a dull feeling, boredom is commonly associated with negativity. Mention should be made in this respect of feminist and queer genealogies which have strongly emphasized the importance of seemingly negative affective states such as shame, sadness, or anger.[18] These works highlight queer affective capacities to embrace failure, discomfort, and uncertainty. In this critical regard, boredom could hold a powerful place as an ambivalent feeling, providing a space for social discontent and critical reflection. Nevertheless, there are very few critical studies of feminist and queer boredom in contemporary cultural objects. If the aesthetics of boredom cultivated by a certain type of lesbian independent cinema appears to be a set of deliberate strategies, it is worth mentioning that boredom is incidentally a trope within mainstream media portrayals of lesbian coming-of-age stories. As it is shown by Whitney Monaghan in *Queer Girls, Temporality and Screen Media: Not "Just a Phase,"* queer love "is depicted as a means of rebelling or experimenting in the face of monotonous teenage boredom" by teen movies such as *My Summer of Love* (2004) by Paweł Pawlikowski.[19] According to the structuring logics of heteronormative temporality, queerness is nothing more than a temporary distraction. As the common saying goes, "it is just a phase." Both linked to homosexuality and adolescence, the dull monotony of boredom is regarded as *unproductive*. A wasted emotion

Yvonne Rainer. *MURDER and murder*. Film still.

according to heterosexual norms, boredom thus shares affinities with theories of queer temporality. In that respect, Jack Halberstam argues that queerness' temporality develops "an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices."[20] Along with Lee Edelman and José Esteban Muñoz, Halberstam draws attention to the potentiality of queerness to destabilize a linear conception of time.[21]

If heteronormative representations of love and relationships seem to promote (re)productive values, queer boredom deviates from the norm by embracing useless and meditative time. This critical mode of boredom is particularly significant in Yvonne Rainer's movies, and notably in *MURDER and murder* (1996). A celebrated American dancer, choreographer, and experimental filmmaker, Rainer has constantly investigated the mundane and the banal in her dance and film. In her choreographies, the complex exploration of ordinary gestures, actions, and objects, is conducive to the emergence of a more concrete dancing physicality. In the early seventies, galvanized by feminist writings, Rainer began to examine her experience as a woman as well as the complexity of emotions through the moving body and moving images. Turning to cinema from the 1970s to the 1990s, and completing seven feature-length films, from *Lives of Performers* (1971) to her last movie *MURDER and murder*, she mobilized the most radical strategies of structural experimental cinema: ranging from repetition of images to extreme duration, from the dismantling of narrative to the privileging of discourse over image. In most of her movies, she made a radical use of voiceover through the disjunction of sound and image. At the end of the 1980s, Rainer started to claim her lesbian identity, first politically and then personally. Very broadly inspired by her love relationship with the queer and feminist theorist Martha Gever, *MURDER and murder* marked her return to storytelling and dealt with queer identities in a heteronormative society.[22] In addition to exploring what it means to be or become a lesbian, it gives visibility to sexuality and love between aging women, a subject that is almost completely inexistent in cinema, since it concerns two taboos: the

body and the sexuality of older women, on the one hand, and lesbianism, on the other hand. However, this coherent narrative is intertwined with the story of Rainer's own battle with breast cancer and with political denunciations of homophobia, stigma, medicine abuse, and toxic chemicals.

While the film shows a series of turmoil and upheavals, the concluding scene of the movie depicts a plain everyday life moment between the two lovers, Mildred and Doris, in a kitchen furnished with the bare necessities. Mostly silent, this episode consists of a long sequence shot, showing the two women making dinner. While the film is mainly characterized by a dynamic rhythm, Rainer reconnects here with her fondness for extended duration, nothingness, and the hyperrealist everyday. In this long and slow scene, one has to pay attention to ordinary words, gestures, and perceptions. Mildred attempts to sing; Doris laughs; Mildred warms up the soup while Doris sets the table; they wait together until the dinner is ready, in silence, then they sit opposite one another at the kitchen table to eat. In this non-diegetic and non-dramatic time, the duration becomes pervading and lumbering, reaching the depths of boredom. Titled "the rest of this life," the film's conclusion prevents any heterosexual male voyeurism by showing plain lesbian everydayness. Additionally, this film section appears as strongly political at a time when the discrimination of homosexuals was legal and the domestic partnership was denied in the majority of the United States. In this regard, Rainer turns away from what Sara Ahmed describes as the everydayness and affectiveness of compulsory heterosexuality "wrapped up […] with moments of ceremony (birth, marriage, death), which bind families together, and with the ongoing investment in the sentimentality of friendship and romance."[23] According to Ahmed, heteronormativity functions as a structure of domination as well as a structure of emotions: heterosexuality is represented as the primordial condition for a good life and thus also for happiness.[24] Writing about the politics of slow cinema, Karl Schoonover declares: "Queerness often looks a lot like wasted time, wasted lives, wasted productivity. Queers luxuriate

while others work. Queers seem always to have time to waste."[25] By ending her film on a scene of seemingly wasted time, far from the mainstream assumption of what should be a romantic happy ending, Rainer claims the hyper-presentness of queer life. Through the enduring feeling of the present and ordinary experience, through daily rituals and humble gestures, she emphasizes how boredom allows for a queer visual, emotional, and temporal emancipation from the logic of heterosexuality. Chantal Akerman, Su Friedrich, and Yvonne Rainer have in common a desire to confront the audience with some exceedingly uncomfortable moments as an artistic gesture against a prevailing mode of passive reception. In many ways, boredom opens space and temporality emancipated from straight scripts and mainstream cinematic aesthetics, thus shaping the bodies of a dissenting community. From the affective perspective of sexual and gender minorities, intense boredom mingles with a queer ontological and political pleasure.

In her essay "Historical ennui, feminist boredom" (1996), Patrice Petro claimed that the feminist aesthetic of boredom is an attempt "to create spaces for reflection, renewal and change."[26] Depicting waiting situations, favoring temporal distension, disabling fascination and voyeurism by giving the mundane its proper and heavy weight, Chantal Akerman, Su Friedrich, and Yvonne Rainer have taken over a complex and ambivalent feeling as a way to open up alternative configurations *within* film for queer and feminist subjectivities and affectivities. Their works highlight how boredom enables the emergence of dissenting spectatorial communities by challenging the cinematic and emotional norms. In this regard, boredom offers reflexive and critical space-time, lying outside of the paradigmatic markers of the dominant temporal regime.

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2 Patrice Petro. "Historical Ennui, Feminist Boredom." *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event,* edited by Vivian Sobchack, Routledge, 1996, p. 187-199.

3 Dijana Jelača. "Film Feminism, Post-Cinema, and the Affective Turn." *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender,* edited by Kristin Lené Hole, Dijana Jelača and E. Ann Kaplan, Routledge, 2017, pp. 446-457; Anu Koivunen. "The Promise of Touch: Turns to Affect in Feminist Film Theory." *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures,* edited by Laura Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers, Amsterdam University Press, 2015, pp. 97-110.

4 Ann Cvetkovich. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press, 2003.

5 Johanna Renard. *Poétique et politique de l'ennui dans la danse et le cinéma d'Yvonne Rainer*. PhD Dissertation, Université Rennes 2, 2016; published under the title *Outrageous Boredom: politique et subjectivité dans la danse et le cinéma d'Yvonne Rainer*. De l'Incidence éditeur, forthcoming in 2022.

6 Patricia Meyer Spacks. *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*. University of Chicago Press, 1995; Elizabeth S. Goodstein. *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity*. Stanford University Press, 2005.

7 See the recent publication of the *Boredom Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2017), a Canadian anthology edited by Michael Gardiner and Julian Halaydin, bringing together the seminal works of Elizabeth Goodstein, Frances Colpitt and Lars Svendsen.

8 Walter Benjamin. *Charles Baudelaire*: *A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism.* Verso*,* 1997; Siegfried Kracauer. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. 1963. Harvard University Press, 2005; Georg Simmel. "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben." *Gesamtausgabe 7.1: Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901-1908,* ed. by Rüdiger Ramme, Angela Rammstedt, Otthein Rammstedt. Suhrkamp, 1995, p. 116-131; Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani, eds. *Essays on Boredom and Modernity.* Rodopi, 2009.

9 Allison Pease. *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom.* Cambridge University Press, 2012; Patricia Meyer Spacks. *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind.*

10 Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique.* Norton, 1963.

11 Patrice Petro. "After Shock, between Boredom and History." 1993. *Aftershocks of the New: Feminism and Film History,* Rutgers University Press, 2002, p. 57.

12 On this question, see Ivone Margulies. *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday.* Duke University Press, 1996.

13 "Le temps n'a qu'une réalité, celle de l'instant. Autrement dit, le temps est une réalité resserrée sur l'instant et suspendue entre deux néants." Gaston Bachelard. *L'intuition de l'Instant.* Stock, 2003, p. 16.

14 See Scott MacDonald. "From Zygote to Global Cinema via Su Friedrich's Films." *Journal of Film and Video,* vol. 44, no. 1-2, 1992, p. 30-41.

15 Catherine Russell. "Culture as Fiction: The Ethnographic Impulse in the Films of Peggy Ahwesh, Su Friedrich, and Leslie Thornton." *The New American Cinema,* edited by Jon Lewis, Duke University Press, 1998, p. 365.

16 Judith Mayne. *Framed. Lesbians, Feminists, and Media Culture.* University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 208.

17 Roland Barthes. "Dear Antonioni ..." Reprinted in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *L'avventura,* BFI Film Classics, Palgrave Macmillan, 1997, p. 67.

18 See for example Sara Ahmed. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.* Edinburgh University Press, 2004; Ann Cvetkovich. *Depression. A Public Feeling.* Duke University Press, 2012; Sally R. Munt. *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame.* Ashgate, 2008; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity.* Duke University Press, 2003.

19 Whitney Monaghan. *Queer Girls, Temporality and Screen Media: Not "Just a Phase."* Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 42.

20 J. Jack Halberstam. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York University Press, 2005, p. 1.

21 Lee Edelman. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press, 2004; José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* New York University Press, 2009.

22 Catherine Lord. "Looking Like a Lesbian: Yvonne Rainer's Theory of Probability." *Documents*, no. 10, 1997, pp. 31-42.

23 Sara Ahmed. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 153.

24 Sara Ahmed. *The Promise of Happiness*, Duke University Press, 2010.

25 Karl Schoonover. "Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema's Laboring Body, the Political Spectator, and the Queer." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2012, pp. 65-78.

26 Patrice Petro. "Historical Ennui, Feminist Boredom." *Aftershocks of the New*, p. 93.