

Yvonne Rainer

Uncertain Relations

presented in collaboration with the San Francisco Art Institute Graduate Division,
Spheres of Interest: Experiments in Thinking & Action,
the graduate lecture series, directed by René Green, Dean of Graduate Studies

Distinguished Professor in the Claire Trevor School of the Arts at UC Irvine, Yvonne Rainer began her career as a dancer and choreographer in the 1950s. In the early '70s, after nearly twenty years working in modern dance, she turned her attentions to filmmaking. Over the subsequent twenty-five years, she has made seven experimental feature films, including *Lives of Performers*, *The Man Who Envied Women* and *MURDER and murder*. Encouraged by a commission from the Baryshnikov Dance Foundation, she returned to choreography in 2000 for the White Oak Dance Project. Recent work includes choreography on *AG Indexical, with a little help from H.M.* (a revision of Balanchine's *Agon*), *RoS Indexical* (a revision of Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring*) and *Spiraling Down* (a meditation on soccer, aging and war), as well as a video installation for a traveling solo gallery exhibition comprising dance and texts that touch on art and politics in fin-de-siècle Vienna. Rainer published a memoir, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life*, in 2006. (SFAI)

Saturday, November 21, 2009 — San Francisco Art Institute
Yvonne Rainer: Uncertain Relations
Journeys from Berlin/1971
Yvonne Rainer In Person

The films of Yvonne Rainer confront the personal implications of social and political issues with a keen wit, inventive sensibility and uncompromising voice. Interweaving narrative and non-narrative elements while challenging expectations of fact and fiction, *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, Rainer's fourth feature, is a groundbreaking exploration of the personal and political realms of psychiatry, feminism, terrorism and power. (Vanessa O'Neill)

Journeys from Berlin/1971 (1980) by Yvonne Rainer; 16mm screened as video, b&w, sound, 125 minutes, exhibition DVD from Zeitgeist Films

Even more than her earlier films, *Journeys...* is a disjunctive, post-Godardian assemblage of discrete events. Four separate narratives weave around each other and a series of recurring street scenes with the interlocking patterns of a wickerwork basket. One strand presents a history of political repression in post-war Germany through an intermittent series of titles. A second narrative consists of voice-over excerpts from the diary of an adolescent girl [...]. The third is purely aural as well: two New York intellectuals (Amy Taubin and Vito Acconci) discuss 19th Century terrorists and the Baader-Meinhof Gang as they prepare and eat dinner. The din of a neighbor's disco party is occasionally heard in the background.

Only the fourth narrative strand involves a synchronous sound and image. This is the psychoanalytic session of a fifty-ish woman (film theorist Annette Michelson, one of Rainer's most consistent champions). Rainer gives Michelson some of the funniest, most ruthlessly honest lines I've ever heard in a movie house, and Michelson responds with the most bravura performance in any Rainer film. In her cultivated George Sanders drawl, Michelson delivers a wonderfully dense monologue that careens cranky observation to sexual recollection to literary allusion—a hilarious cascade of non-sequiturs that suggests Zippy the Pinhead with a Ph.D.

[...] Initially, *Journey's...* is quite disorienting. If the film has a definite trajectory, it is also a field to be entered at any point, filled with cross-references which only become apparent on a subsequent viewing. Gradually, Rainer established a continual, abstract sense of daily life and of a West Germany that, with its

oppressive prosperity and totalitarian newspeak, seems the world's most advanced state, the Future. These serve as backdrops for Taubin and Acconci's mock-Socratic dialogue on terror, as well as for the voices of precocious innocence and world-weary experience as they contrapuntally discuss egotism, the family, suicide and social consciousness.

A mixture of fiction and autobiography is the hallmark of all of Rainer's films. There's a sense in which she's revived the psychodrama that Maya Deren pioneered, albeit in a cooler and more ironic mode—full of stand-ins and split personae. The three female voices in *Journeys...* are, of course, all Rainer's. The diary is, in fact, her own written when she was sixteen. With the film's penultimate movement, she begins rapidly intercutting or overlapping the dialogue of all three (and the now-female shrink) to suggest that, in the absence of a total political commitment, one could develop a capacity for risk-taking and an active empathy. She follows this with a reading of one of Ulrike Meinhof's last letters, in which Meinhof describes the psychiatric coercion applied to her in prison and advises a similarly incarcerated friend. The last image, one of genuine humility, has Rainer being taught to play the recorder. The juxtaposition is akin to Gramsci's exhortation: 'Pessimism of the mind, optimism of the will.'" (J. Hoberman, "All About Yvonne," *The Village Voice*. February 11, 1980)

Sunday, November 22, 2009 — San Francisco Art Institute
Yvonne Rainer: Uncertain Relations
Privilege
Yvonne Rainer In Person

In *Privilege*, Rainer takes on the rarely explored subject of menopause and constructs a fascinating, witty and complex social critique of empowerment and class while delving into issues of age, sexuality and race. Playing with narrative conventions while simultaneously disrupting notions of continuity and identity, Rainer weaves the emotional and fictive realms of melodrama, documentary, text and archival imagery into a richly textured and compelling work. (Vanessa O'Neill)

Privilege (1990) by Yvonne Rainer; 16mm screened as video, color, sound, 100 minutes, exhibition DVD from Zeitgeist Films

"*They* have Connery, Eastwood, Redford, still doing the romantic thing. *We* have Rowlands, Woodward, Maggie Smith every once in a blue moon allowed to play an unfulfilled aging lady.

"This is all part of it, but Rainer the bold, the taboo-stalker, typically extends her critique well beyond any simple bitching session. As age renders a woman invisible, suddenly she is distinctly outside the *privilege* that comes with being noticed, looked at, taken in—i.e., desirable. [...] Moreover, on the other side of age, she's now faced with the startling fact that she has worked, traded on, stayed unconsciously dependent on, her status as an object of desire. All this time it was youth and youth only.

"The crux of Rainerian analysis here is that the fall into age—or the tumble into humiliation—both only bestows insight into mortality but also into invisibility. That is, into oppression. From a position of unearned privilege and ipso facto visibility, the menopausal white woman suddenly becomes as powerless but also potentially as wily and elusive as Ellison's invisible man. She now has the social burden, as well as the critical advantage, of the outsider—or the afflicted, diseased or handicapped. It's as if she were, say, deaf. This analogy, I take it, is what leads Rainer to show a black woman translating [the protagonist's] speech into American Sign Language.

"One of this psychodrama's two central characters is a big, striking, straight-talking Marxist filmmaker named 'Yvonne,' played by Novella Nelson, a very imposing African American. (Am I just imagining wish fulfillment in the casting?) No funny Valentine she. As the film's moral-political authority, 'Yvonne' avoids the usual what-menopause-means-to-white-women analysis. 'White women use their victim status to let themselves off the hook of racism,' she admonishes her white Freudian friend Jenny. (Rainer is not about to let anyone off any hook.) To 'Yvonne' menopause doesn't arrive as the first indignity." (Georgia Brown, "Flash Points," *The Village Voice*. January 15, 1991)